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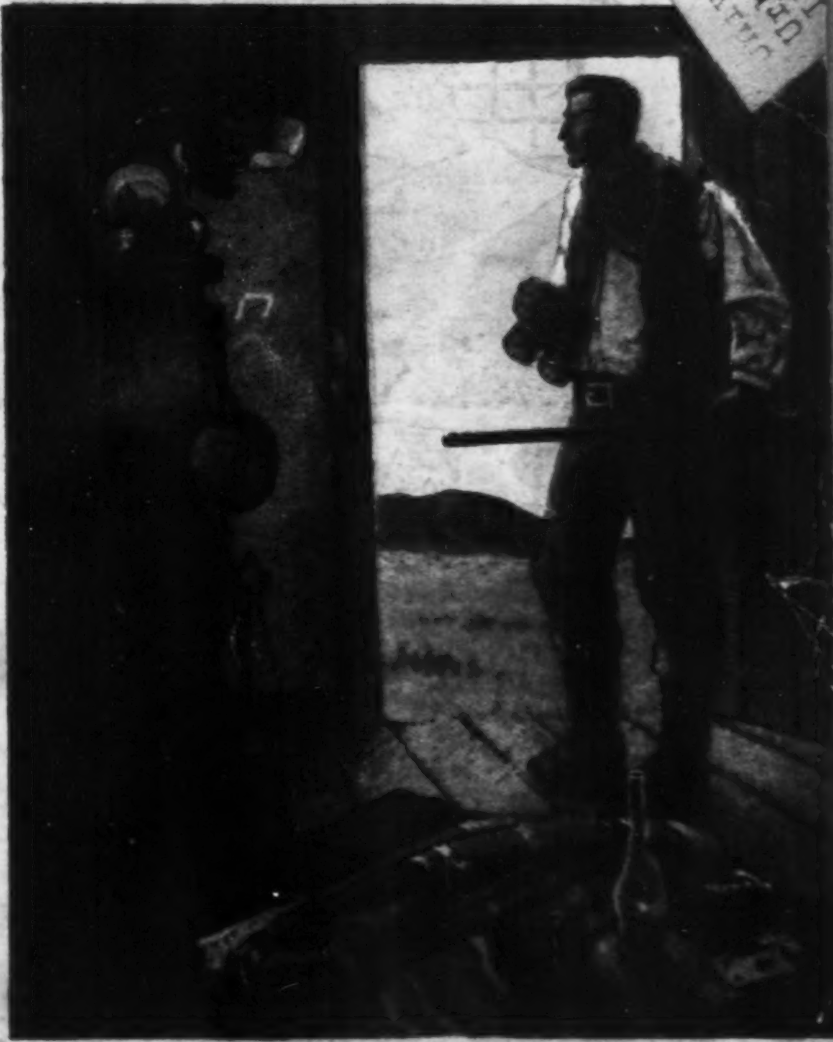
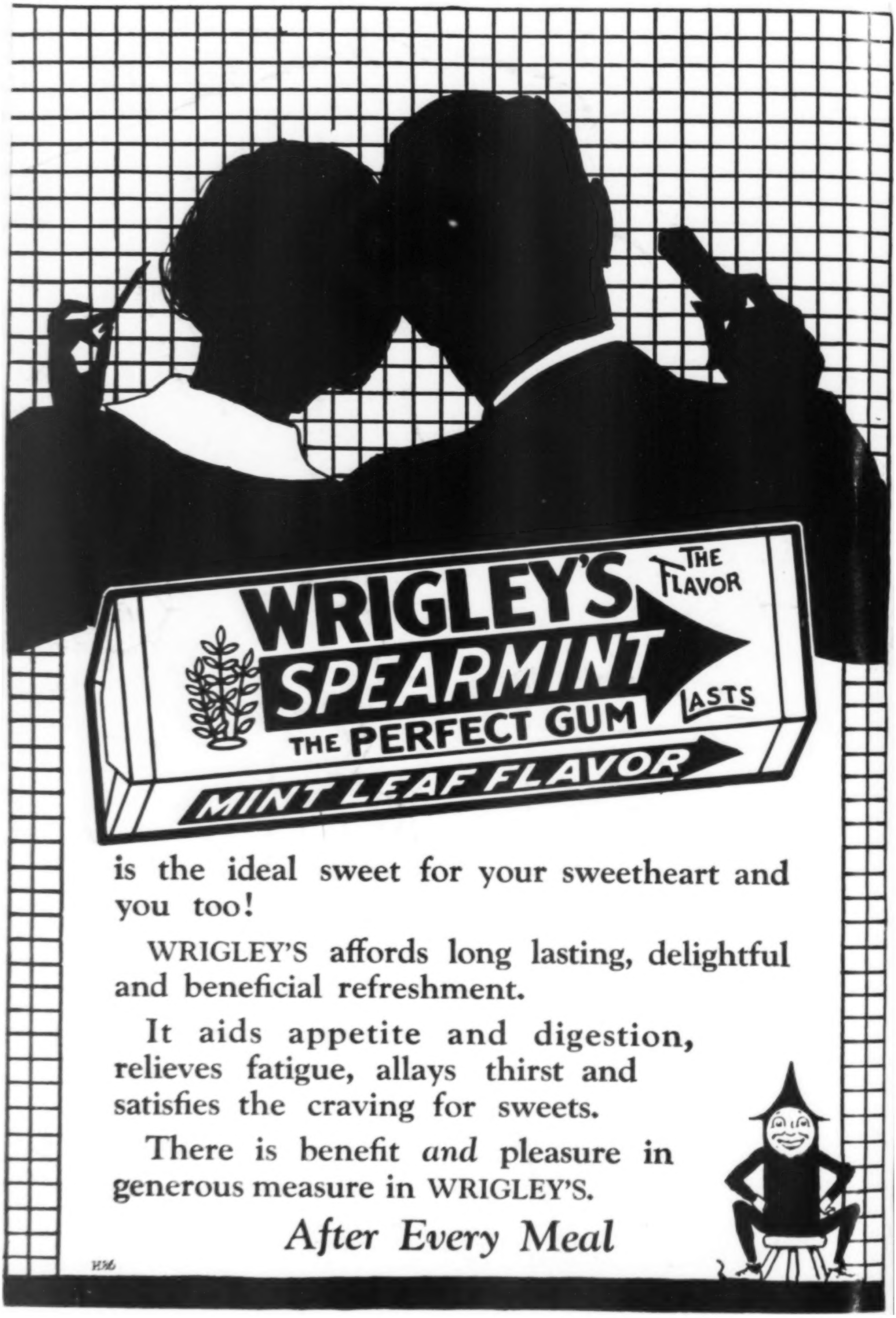


And the
Beginning of

The Roaring Towns

By HUGH PENDEXTER

A Story of Cheyenne When It Was the Wildest of the Frontier Towns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After Every Meal

November, 1927
Vol. LVII No. 5

Everybody's

OSCAR GRAEVE
Editor

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Cover Painting by John A. Maxwell

Headings by Arthur Dove

PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE RIDGWAY COMPANY
JOSEPH A. MOORE, President LEVIN RANK, Secy. & Treas.
SPRING AND MACDOUGAL STREETS, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Entered as Second-Class Matter, August 16, 1899, at the Post-Office, New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Chicago, Illinois. Yearly subscription, $2.50, in advance. Single copy, twenty-five cents. Foreign postage, $1.00 additional. No extra postage for Canada.

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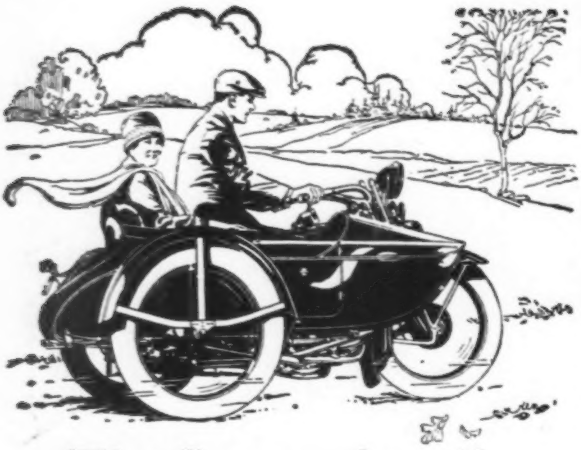

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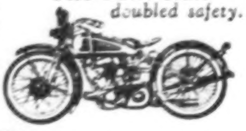

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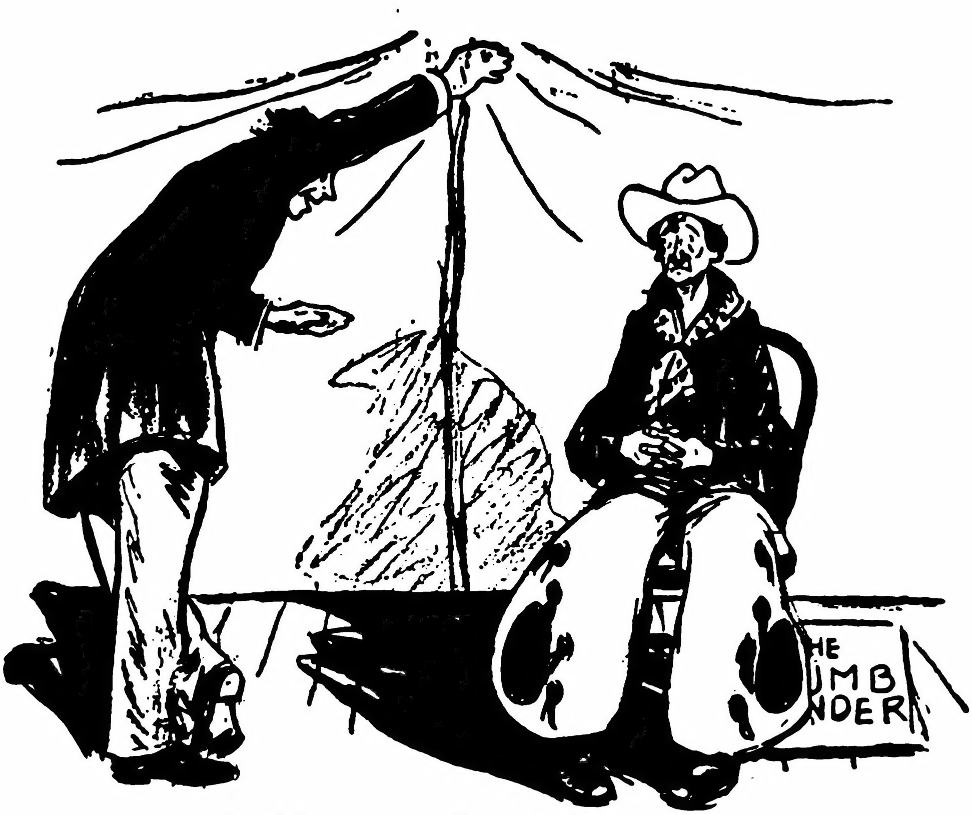


Thomas Thursday

Spins a merry tale of Hair-Oil Harrigan and

The Dumb Wonder

I

WELL, hombres, or gents—suit yourselves—I wish you could of tuned in on the beautiful sock in the whiskers that Hair-Oil Harrigan and his little playmate, viz., Cowboy Cassidy, presented for our approval in the land of the Golden West. Speaking of cactus, it certainly would have been "golden" to them grifters if they had cashed in, but we happened to get an even break and, since luck is a matter of luck, what's the use of kicking?

In case my face ain't familiar, as Dempsey remarked after the Tunney pasting, I'm Doc McKeezick, and the portfolio I held at the time of this annoyance was untasty and tiresome. To make a clean breast of matters, I was managing the side-show with Ike Sullivans' Wild West Rodeo and Freak Hippodrome, which was plowing through Arizona when this contribution to assault and battery took place. If I may keep you awake for a few minutes, please adjust the headphones and I'll broadcast the flop of the century.

We was playing a stand at Massacre Center when Hair-Oil Harrigan shuffled into view. Previous to that we had showed to one bloomer after the other, not that I didn't have as good a line-up of quack attractions as ever played the sticks. For instance, I had Baby Vampo, Fattest Girl on Earth; Skeletino, the Human Hair-Pin; Frank Lentini, the Three-Legged Boy—one of the best attractions in the game—and about six other high class exhibits. But things didn't seem to click, and business was so bad that Old Man Sullivan looked as disgusted as a jockey watching a merry-go-round.

Well, as the oil-drillers remark, me and Side-Trap Simpkins are roosting on the bally-stand when Hair-Oil ambles up, escorted by the saddest looking beezark I have ever seen. No fooling, compared to him the late Mons. Dante wouldst look like Gloria Swanson! I hadn't had the displeasure of seeing Hair-Oil for about two years; in fact, the last time I saw him he was plenty busy, and so was the sheriff chasing him. Hair-Oil's trick in life was anything from selling 'scopes on the sidewalks of New York to high-pitching through the land, peddling Chief Wrinkle-Pans' Diamond Hair Elixir, guaranteed to cure mumps, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria, gout, bunions, tonsillitis, kidney trouble, water-on-the-brain, dandruff, or what have you?

Greetings over, Hair-Oil gets down to business.

"Doc," he says, "I ask you to take a slant at this merry lad that I have promoted from the hills back yonder. I found him secretary-ing a flock of sheep, and I couldst tell that he was losing heavy money at the game. I told him about Sullivans' Wild West Rodeo and Freak Hippodrome playing down here and promised to get him a berth with the kid-show."

"I don't need a janitor," I says.

"Your thinking is all moist," he retorts. "Does this guy look like a janitor?"

"He ain't a giraffe, is he?" demands Side-Trap, the best inside lecturer under canvas.

"Extinguish the cluck wit and humor," snarls Hair-Oil. "This—"

"By the way," I cuts in, "what has befell you and the hair-hoisting grift?"

"Not so loud," he cautions, looking around. "I have given that up for the nonce. You see, Doc, I had a dumb-gong partner, and he carelessly got cockeyed stewed one day and mixes up the wrong ingredients. You know that I never used anything more expensive than ten parts of coal oil to ninety parts water, but what d'yer suppose that proper clown does? Well, sir, he gets balled up on the kegs and, instead of using the coal oil, the sap pours in a load of the choice honey that I been toting around for my personal pancakes; so after I had sold a flock of the goo in Rio Demise, Wyoming, I made the slight error of sticking around the burg for a extra day. Not so good! The lads who innocently invested in that famous hair-hoister awoke next morning to find their nuts stuck to the pillows, and as soon as they broke loose they became interested in my location. By the time I stop running I'm at least two counties ahead of my partner, and that's how I happened to discover Cowboy Cassidy. Look 'im over, kid!"

I take an eagle's-eye view of nature's gift to manhood, and he sums up like this: six-foot-six high, a half-foot wide, and a face as sad-looking as arsenic on oysters.

"Well," I says, "what *is* this guy?"

"A good bet for the kid-show," confesses Hair-Oil. "Listen, my children, and you shall hear just how we put it over. First, I call your attention to the boy's sober pan, which you might have noted before. The folks in his neighborhood tell me that he ain't smiled since Napoleon wore a bib, although he has a wonderful sense of humor. Personally, he claims that he has mastered the art of abnormal self-control, and he would be able to bet fifty thousand bucks that no one on earth could make him grin—if he had the fifty thousand bucks."

"Does that make me a Elk or a Noble?" I asks. "If you have anything up your sleeve, let it slide down."

"I have," says he. "Listen heavy. Mr. Cassidy will be added to your collection of cluck curiosities, under the high-sounding title of *Cowboy Cassidy—The Man Who Never Smiles*. He will sit calmly on one of the platforms and, just to make it interesting to the cash customers, the management of this show will offer a small reward to any lad or lassie who succeeds in making him crack a grin. And just to give the girls a even break, Mr. Cassidy will be pleased to marry any female who turns the trick."

"What a bargain the gal wouldst get!" gloops Side-Trap, a born raconteur.

"That's a good advertising angle," goes on Hair-Oil. "I will be pleased to appoint myself the chief of his publicity department, and I'll guarantee to work up more compound interest than a bank."

"How much will this male beauty set us back per weekly?" I want to know.

"Well, the—er—lowest possible figure should be one hundred smackers a week; but considering the fact that you and Old Man Sullivan think no more of a dime than Lindbergh does of his airplane, I will make you a extry special price of fifty berries, payable in real money."

"What does the dumb wonder get out of it?" enquires Side-Trap.

"I'll see that he eats tasty and often," replies the big-hearted Hair-Oil. "He's easy to get along with; ain't you, Cowboy?"

"Shore am," admits Cassidy. "Just tell the folks not to stick any pins in muh, tha's all."

To come to the point, as the sharpener remarked to the pencil, I hire the Hair-Oil entry, then inform Old Man Sullivan about my brilliant addition.

"Huh," he sniffs. "What and the hell kinda clown is he? Ain't this outfit got enough sad-mapped umpchays around already?"

"You have failed to grab the big idea," I pacifies. "This lad will be a good crowd-puller, and should jam 'em in like Tunney playing the kerosene wheel. Besides, we got a good gaff on his act."

"What d'yer mean—good gaff?" he sizzles.

"We will offer a reward to any man, woman or child who can make him laugh during business hours," I explains.

"Of what—your old pants?"

"Of one hundred dollars," I says, and edge a bit nearer the door. Mons. Sullivan had no more use for a hundred berries than a whale has for the ocean.

"What!" he yelps. "D'yer mean *my* money? Suppose he should slip up and let forth a giggle, huh?"

"Not a chance," I soothes. "But if he does—we'll fire 'im speedy."

"Only fire 'im? You mean we'll *kill* 'im, and I don't mean I reckon so!"

OUR next stop was entitled Horizontal Gulch, which was no doubt named after the lads who were shot into that position via six-guns. Hair-Oil Harrigan had gone ahead of the show and had succeeded in grabbing off some neat publicity for his playmate. On Monday, the *Weekly Buckshot* had a half-page blurb—Russian for write-up—about Cowboy Cassidy, and according to the bed-time story, Mr. Cassidy had studied for many years before he had been able to master the rare art of abnormal self-control. For years and years, and then five more, he had lived alone, midst the silences of the wide open spaces where men were men and the women were no doubt ladies. All in all, as a press-agent, Hair-Oil was just one lap behind Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm Brothers when it come to fairy tales and kindred boloney.

"Speaking of Barnum," says Hair-Oil, "what do you think of the dish I prepared for this paper?"

"Kid," I replies, "you are a bit too good for this world. When you kick off, they'll declare a dividend in heaven. But listen, Big Boy: if that dizzy chump laughs I'll bounce a center pole off his head and then test it out on yours."

"Non-working fears," deprecates Hair-Oil. "In short, they're idle. Just to show you what sort of faith I have in this lad's ability to keep a sober face, I will personally deposit with you a cash bond of one hundred bucks, which you can hold—I said *hold*, not shoot crap with—and if the boy grins you will be even. What d'yer think of *them* berries?"

He counts out ten tens and, although the temptation to take them was something fierce, I wave 'em aside majestically.

"If you think Cassidy is so good that you are willing to stake your right eye, ears, and blood on him—meaning that hundred pieces of eight—I'm willing to take a chance myself. He must be plenty good, what I mean!"

"Damn good," admits Hair-Oil, pocketing the load of loot.

However, as the monkey remarked to the banyan tree, thereby hangs a tail!

II

SANDWICHED between the platforms of Baby Vampo and Skeletino, Cowboy Cassidy sat in state. But honest to Coolidge, if I had known what was going to happen later the dizzy gil wouldst have been *lying* in state, and I don't mean I dream so! He's encased in honest-to-Zane-Grey cowboy ragalia—f. o. b. Sears

Roebuck—including hair-pants and ten-quart sombrero, and if Buffalo Bill had of seen his make-up he'd have kicked the roof off his tomb from pure envy.

The crowd, and it was plenty, consisting of cowboys, rangers, dude wranglers, and the like, passed listlessly from one attraction to the other without showing much enthusiasm. But as soon as Side-Trap Simpkins, the world's premier side-mouth lecturer, reached the platform of the dumb wonder the paying patrons paid *beaucoup* interest, and I don't mean four per cent. Hair-Oil had wised up Side-Trap with a special spiel on Cassidy and his quack history and, although Side-Trap was no Bryan on the oratory stuff, he was one of the best boob-bangers under canvas. Clearing his golden throat of all cheap cut-plug tobacco, Side-Trap inhales a few gobs of foul air and strikes a attitude—Swedish for pose.

"Lay-dees and gen-tle-mun!" he begins. "We now come to our big feetcher attractshun, Cowboy Cassidy, known as The Man Who Never Smiles. You see before you what appears to be a ordinary cow-puncher and that, to make a clean bosom of matters, is what he actually is. How the so ever, Mr. Cassidy has mastered his sensibilities to such a degree that he can control himself at will. In different words, lay-dees and gen-tle-mun, he is a exponent of what he calls abnormal self-control. Now, what does that mean, huh? I'll tell you. For the very good example, when ordinary pee-pul are compelled to laugh out loud, Mr. Cassidy can easily refrain from doing so. Of course, it has took him many years to master the—er—art, but he finally succeeded and now defies the world to make him laugh against his iron will.

"Now, good folks, just to make it interesting to one and all, the management of this gre-a-at show will offer a reward of one hundred dollars in cash to any man, woman, or child in the audience who succeeds in making this man laugh, smile, grin or giggle in any shape, form or manner. And as a special inducement to the single girls, Mr. Cassidy has consented to marry any lady who can turn the trick. But—re-mem-bah! I herewith serve warning that no rough stuff will be tolerated. D'yer get me? No tickling! No touching with the hands! No hatpins, or the like! And listen! The first wise guy who tries to get fresh will be tossed out of the tent on his ear. Re-mem-bah! Aw right! Already, Mr. Cassidy?"

"Already, Mr. Simpkins," drawls the exhibit.

"Les' go!" snaps Side-Trap, then the fun begins.

For a long moment, nobody makes an attempt to grab the prize, each waiting for some one to begin the assult. Finally, a wee puncher, with cross eyes and bandy-legs, wiggles his elephantine ears and starts to edge toward the platform. I get one slant at this contribution to masculine beauty and begin to wonder how he escaped the movie comedies.

"I aim to ask this dumb hombre a few questions," announces the runt.

"Shoot, shrimp!" says Side-Trap politely.

"Before I start," goes on the contestant, "how do I know you'll give muh the money when I win it?"

"Ne-vah count your pickin's before they're snatched," advises Side-Trap. "Start and begin."

"Watch me, pardner. Now, listen, you big sap, I aim to get a few assorted giggles outta yore hide."

"Go to it, my little man," says Cassidy with a well-bred yawn.

"Did yuh ever hear about the puncher who slips off his pony and busted all his promises?" offers peewee.

Plenty whiskers on that one, eh?

"I believe I heard that one last week," admits Cassidy. "You see, fellah, I read all the current comic magazines myself. What else d'yer know, if anything?"

"Think your right pert, don't yuh?" hurls back the little herring, peeved. "You ain't got no sense of humor, you flatfoot!"

"Neither have you, Runty," shouts a bass voice from the rear. "That wasn't no joke, that was a cemetry. Shut up and let *me* at 'im!"

A HUSKY rancher plows forward, with "hard-boiled" written all over his pan.

"Greetings, sober guy!" he fires at Cassidy. "In case you don't know me, I'm no less than George Washington, and I fought for liberty. D'yer know what Liberty is, stupid?"

"A statue," shoots back the dumb wonder, and I guess we'll have to pay him off on that, eh? "Excuse me, fellah, but your left ear is loose," sadly continues Cassidy.

"Don't get too pussonal," snaps the large gent. "And listen, crab, I intend to make you laugh if I hafter shoot up this heah tent!" ..

"I guess you didn't hear me," butts in Side-Trap. "I have already announced that no rough stuff wouldst be tolerated during Mr. Cassidy's exhibition. Didn't you hear me the first time, wise guy?"

"Are *you* figgerin' on stopping me?" whinnies the tough egg.

Not wishing to turn the joint into a Belleau Woods or even a Bunker Hill I hastily steps up to the snappy customer and takes him by the arm.

"Brother," I says, "I am wholly convinced that you are a very, very bad guy to monkey with, and that you couldst shoot up this wigwam with no trouble at all. In fact, I have read plenty about you guys in the magazines, and I have seen you do your stuff in the movies, so if you will please be nice I'll esteem it a favor to the management. How about shaking on it, Big Boy?"

"Cactus Kennedy ne-vah starts anything he don't finish," he snarls. "What's more, I'll give that big bum a half-second to apologize for remarkin' that muh ear is loose. I will also give him the same amount of time to laugh at muh joke. If he don't, I aim to start target practice pronto!"

"Oh, a tough baby, hey?" says Side-Trap from the platform. "Okay by me! If you're looking for trouble, and ain't got any objection to fighting like a man—meaning with fists and bare-knuckles—kindly oblige by stepping outside, where we won't scare the ladies. How about it, kid?"

Cactus Kennedy narrows his shifty eyes and, like the well-advertised flash, whips out a six-gun.

"Brat," he barks, "hoist 'em up!"

"Hoist your old man!" sizzles Side-Trap, leaping off the platform. "There ain't guts enough in you to pull that trigger, you stew-bum! Gimme 'at pop gun before I wrap a stake around your neck!"

Whilst he delivered the last of that cryptic address, Side-Trap shoots a torrid left hook to Mons. Kennedy's flabby chin, a chin that was never made for the wear and tear of brutal fisticuffs. In short, Cactus collapses in a neat pile and spends a few moments in the study of authentic astronomy.

"That's that," remarks Side-Trap, stepping over the lad. "Guys like you would last less than *no* time around the gas house district of dear old New Yawk; and if you tried to do your battling with a gun, instead of a set of Irish-American fists, they'd toss you off the Brooklyn Bridge onto the deck of a passing ferry boat. What d'yer think of *them* onions?"

I naturally expected the lad's playmates to step up and begin a civil war but not a drum, or gun, was heard. I guess the odd fact that a guy had the nerve to settle matters with his fists, instead of a gun—which any damfool can use—must of given the rough hombres something to think about, hey? Meantime, Side-Trap yanks the dizzy chump to his wobbly feet, jerks the sombrero over his bean, and then remounts the platform.

"Now, good folks," he resumes, "seeing that that's all settled, to *my* satisfaction, anyways, is there anybody else in the audience who wouldst care to make Cowboy Cassidy smile? Also, is there anybody else in the house who thinks I'm kidding when I remarks that no rough stuff will be tolerated?"

No one stirred. Side-Trap passed on to the next attraction and, if it's all the same to you, I'll pass on to the next chapter.

III

THE next stand was another duck-in-and-duck-out burg with the tasty title of Hellbent Haven. Just where in the hellbent they grab off them appetizing names is a mystery to me, as Sherlock Holmes remarked to Watson. Anyway, just before we opened Monday, Hair-Oil Harrigan sidles up to me with a fresh load of nerve.

"Doc," he begins, "you will have to admit that I have given you the biggest, best, and brightest attraction in the kid-show. You will also admit—without me socking you over the head with a stake—that, when it comes to pulling in the crowds, Cassidy is just a shade behind Chaplin, Tunney, and Lindbergh. In different words, he's the grapefruit."

"Don't bush around the beat," I says. "What's on what passes for your mind?"

"Well," continues Hair-Oil Harrigan. "I was just wondering if Old Man Sullivan would have brains enough to pay us one hundred bucks the weekly, instead of the lousey stipend we are now receiving?"

"Listen, burglar," I replies in my usual gentlemanly manner, "if you can get the Old Man to raise the ante on Cassidy so soon, you're too astute for show business. I wouldst suggest that you go in to the business of peddling celluloid teeth to kid-show fire-eaters."

"Are you hinting that Cassidy ain't the chief gimmick in the show?" he whinnies.

"I will concede that he's a very good yokel-yanker," I says, "but I have seen much better. He ain't no Buffalo Bill, what I mean!"

"Maybe not," he breaks down and confesses. "Anyhow, just ask the Old Gent about that little boost in wages, and let me know what he thinks. Of course, if he's dumb enough to reject it, I'll be obliged to accept the offer I have received from the Ginsburgh-McGinty Circus and—"

Well, *that* was a horse from a different cowboy!

"Er, just the moment," I says; "just the one moment. I will dash over to the treasury-wagon and get you the low-down. If you hear a rumpus, you will know that I'm about to come out without touching the steps. That will also be the signal that you don't get the raise."

"Fair enough," agrees Hair-Oil. "If he tosses you too far, I'll be glad to act as a brake. Good luck, kid!"

"Do that," I begs, and dashes toward the Old Mans' den.

Asking Mister Sullivan to raise anything, even windows, was just as easy as locating roosters with buck teeth. I knew darn well that Cowboy Cassidy was a winner and a prime boob-banger, and could be built up bigger and better as the season advanced. However, I was careless enough to enter the Old Mans' trap at the wrong time—he was engaged in counting up the net losses from last week—and I couldst tell by the way he was mangling his cigar that he was as pleasant as a case of small-pox.

"Hello, Mr. Sullivan," I starts, with what I thought was my best smile and drawing-room manner. "I called to see you about—"

"Whaddayuhwant?" he snorts, without even looking up to see whether I was the Prince of Wales or the White House Spokesman. "Make it snappy—come to the point—and blow out. Well?"

"Speaking of that Cowboy Cassidy act," I says, the bit non-plussed, "I was going to suggest—"

"Cassidy, hey?" he sniffs. "Y'know, I been thinking about that thing myself. How come we're paying that clown fifty dollars a week, when half of that would be twice plenty? I must of been out of my mind when I succumbed to that hold up. And what and the hell does he do all day, except nothing, huh?"

"You don't understand," I sputters. "Why, that guy is the one big hit of the show! No fooling, Mr. Sullivan, he's pulling in the boys and girls something great; and he's due to be a world-beater in a couple more weeks."

"So's your old progenitor!" hoots Mons. Sullivan. "Be that as it may, I have decided to pay the lad twenty-five bucks the weekly, from henceforth and now on, and if he don't think he's stealing that, then one of us is crazy. Come in again sometime!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Sullivan," I remonstrates, edging the bit toward the door, "but Hair-Oil Harrigan, his manager, just informs me that he has received a very appetizing offer from the Ginsburgh-McGinty outfit, and you know how that bunch of bandits have been bucking against us, don't you?"

That was a good shot and, what's more, I knew it. The Old Man had as much use for the Ginsburgh-McGinty show as I have for pneumonia.

"H'mm," he muses, dropping his pen. "Has that bunch of ant-eaters been prowling around here again? H'mm. Send Hair-Oil Harrigan to me, and make it speedy. I'll show that bunch of apes where they get off, and I don't mean I reckon so!"

I race back to the bally-stand and tell Hair-Oil to see the Old Man at once, if not sooner.

"What did he say?" asks Hair-Oil, as calm as a whole family of clams.

"Twice plenty. He was about to reduce your grift to twenty-five berries when I coyly mentioned the fact that Ginsburgh-McGinty had been trying to promote you; after which he goes up in the air like a bluebird. That's your ace in the hole—see that you play it!"

"I will," he says, and hoofs it toward the treasury-wagon.

Ten minutes later he returns with a smile as broad as the word itself.

"Well, did he bust you one?" I enquires.

"Yep; one hundred, in real money, payable weekly." He grins jovially and rubs his large hands like the movie version of a pawnbroker.

"Great!" I says. "You're getting away with arson, mayhem and assorted murder."

"That's the mere nothing; the mere nothing," and he snaps his fingers. "That's a bag-a-shells compared to what I hope to get later."

As Shakespeare failed to remark, there's many a true thing said in a jest, and Hair-Oil speakith a trapful!

IV

DURING the next two stands, Cassidy's act goes over like Niagara Falls. He attracts more attention than vinegar on watermelons and, by the time we showed Hootmon, N. M., Hair-Oil presents his latest in propositions.

"By this time I guess you and the Old Man are convinced that Cassidy is a pip," he begins. "That being admitted and settled, I think it's time that Sullivan raised the prize to one grand, the equivalent to one thousand berries, so if any hillbilly succeeds in making Cassidy laugh he'll win a prize worth while. But you know they got as much chance of copping that jack as I have of touring the Atlantic in a flivver."

"If you can get Sullivan to increase the prize to one grand," I retorts, "I wouldst have no trouble in getting a fifty per cent interest in Hank Ford's plants for a dollar-ninety-eight, on time payments. In other syllables, your idea is covered with dew. Why, the Old Man would hurl a brick at you for even mentioning it to him."

"To Gehenna with the Old Man!" explodes Hair-Oil, the bit peeved. "I'm the guy who talked turkey to the real Sullivan, meaning the late John L. I once told John to lean off the bar, whilst he was hibernating in the mill I slung suds in, back in the land of Bawston."

"And did he lean off?" I asks.

"My chin," confesses Hair-Oil reminiscently. "But my chin ain't the point, it's this: How many guys can honestly say they had the nerve to sass the great John L.? So if you think I'm afraid to talk to this quack edition of a Sullivan, I ask you to observe my dust toward the treasury-wagon."

Not wishing to miss any part of the fun, or possible riot, I follow Hair-Oil to the Old Man's coop, and wait outside. A moment later I hear a exact duplication of Verdun, fought with tongues instead of guns.

"What!" yelps Mister Sullivan. "Did I hear you mention one grand as a prize?"

"Why not?" flings back Hair-Oil. "Hell—I thought you was a *real* showman!"

"I am," barks the Old Man; "but I ain't a real bank! Who in the sheol d'yer take me for—Jack Rockefeller? Why, the idea! And just suppose that monkey of yours should get pie-eyed some day, and crack a smile, hey? Blooey one grand! If you hadda think before you spoke the silence wouldn't be broken for centuries. I ask you again, stupid—suppose that clown should break down and laugh?"

"Suppose your ears shouldst turn into spinach?" snorts Hair-Oil. "I'm surprised at you, Mr. Sullivan! I always thought you was one of the gamest showmen since Barnum went into heaven, and here you turn me down on the livest proposition under canvas! Aw right. The only thing left for me to do is to accept the proposition from the Ginsburgh-McGinty trick. Moe Ginsburgh offers me—"

"If that tramp sticks his nose around my outfit I'll run him ragged!" whoops the Old Man. "What's that crook been up to now?"

"Didn't you know that they have been trying to win the Cassidy act away from you?" purrs Hair-Oil. "But I was loyal to you, Mr. Sullivan, and I turns him down flat. I says to him, I says, 'Listen to me, Moe, you known damn well that Hair-Oil Harrigan never double-crosses the show he signs up with and, since Mr. Sullivan was wise enough to see the possibilities in Cassidy, I'm gonna stick with him. I know he'll treat me fair and square.' That's what I told Moe Ginsburgh, Mr. Sullivan."

"You're darn tooting I'll treat you square!" bellers the Old Man, pounding the desk. "And if you think I ain't got the nerve to raise that prize dough to one grand you're off your feed, see! Ike

Sullivan backs his attractions to the limit—that's the kind of little guy *I* am!"

"Fine!" enthuses Hair-Oil. "I knew you had the right spirit all the time. Well, I'll see you all of a sudden!"

Hair-Oil bounds out of the wagon and ambles up smiling.

"So that's all settled," he beams. "Did you hear our concert?"

"Who in New Mexico didn't?" I demands. "You sure played your ace in the hole, all right. He's sure poison against the Ginsburgh-McGinty regiment. It was a good thing for you that you could hold that smell under his nostrils."

"Yeah; it's great stuff, Doc. But just between us, that Ginsburgh-McGinty flock never offered me a cluck dime!"

That, lads and lassies, is showmanship!

"And now that I got that patched up," he goes on, "I have another proposition."

"You got more propositions than Maine has woods," I says. "What's the latest?"

"As you know, Doc, we play Kneecap Center next week, one of the big shots. It's got double the populations of any of the slabs we've played to date, and I have a scheme to drum up Cassidy's act big and nifty."

"How big?"

"Listen," he says. "First, I go to the leading stores of the town and show them babies where they can pull down some snappy publicity for their joints, in the form of free advertising, by putting up some extry prizes for the Cassidy stuff."

"For instance and example?" I urge him on.

"Well, I'll go to the best of the local jewelers, for instance, and get that bird to offer a two-caret diamond ring, and then I'll go to the best of the clothiers and have him offer a complete set of what-the-swell-dressed-man-will-wear, and then I'll line up the premier shoe merchant and have that lad donate a assortment of fancy foot gear to the prize winner, and then—"

"Why not go to the fire department and ask the chief to offer the hook and ladder?" I asks.

"That reminds me, Doc," he beams, "I'll go to the gent who has the Hankford agency, and suggest that he set up the best sport model sedan he has in his drum, with a full tank of gas tossed in for good measure, and—well, perhaps that wouldst be enough prizes, hey?"

"Plenty," I admits, "especially if some sap catches Cassidy off guard and wrings a grin out of him. Boy, wouldn't that be a sour one!"

"Not so sweet," he admits, and walks down the midway.

WELL, to reduce a tall story, we'll cut out six pages of needless boloney and come to Kneecap Center. So here's Kneecap Center, boys and girls. Speed, eh? This burg had a population of more than five thousand assorted inhabitants, sinhabitants and ginhabitants, if you know what I mean. It was one of those wild and wooly towns and would of had a bigger population, if the fiction writers didn't have their heroes and villains bump 'em off via six-guns, lynchings and the like.

A few minutes before I sprung the first ballyhoo, Hair-Oil Harrigan appears upon the lot with satisfaction written all over his pan.

"Well, how'd you make out with the jovial shopkeepers?" I enquires.

"Everything's jake!" he enthuses. "They fell for the big idea like Anthony for Cleopatra. Why, they ate it up like mince pie in a orphan asylum!"

"You wouldn't fool me, would you?" I asks, thinking he was kidding. "If you really put that stunt over, you deserve praise and have mine."

"Ordinary applause will do," he bows. "And did they get in line? Like the army, kid; like the army! And why shouldn't they? Didn't I give each one a big sign, to stick in his window, informing one and all how generous the shopkeeper was in offering the added prize? I did. And didn't I get the local sheet to play up the stunt big on the front page? Ditto. So everything is hotsy and totsy by me!"

"Great stuff," I am compelled to concede. "What did the Old Man think about the added prizes?"

"Suffocated with joy," says Hair-Oil. "He says to me, he says, 'Hair-Oil, I remove my hat to you! You're a master showman, and when better schemes are thought of, you will think them.' That's what he says to me. So I guess I'm good, huh?"

"Very," I says. "I bet we have a big jam out all the week, thanks to the blaah you had in the local paper. You must of hit the editor over the nut with a ax to grab off so much space for Cassidy. Or did you work with chloroform?"

"Plain brains," says he. "Newspaper editors have always been pie for me, and I rarely slip 'em anything. Once in a while I may aim a stogie in their direction, but only under the most annoying circumstances."

SOON after the crowd began to jam the midway like flies around a boarding house table in July. I put on an extra ticket seller—making three—and then gave orders for the first ballyhoo. The Chinese Gazinka—meaning gong—began to blam its unmelodious chime both yon and hither around the neighborhood, waking up the neighbors children, and the like. Pretty soon we had a couple or three thousand natives lined up against the ballystand, anxious to get a peek at Cassidy, the dumb wonder.

Cowboys to the left, ranchers to the right, and Injuns to the middle. As to the Red Skins, boys and girls, I regret to report that these savage Injuns had long ago passed up the pleasure of scalping white gents nuts, and were now engaged in the more lucrative grift of scalping their pockets, via the sale of genuine Indian baskets, trinkets, etc., direct from Montgomery Ward.

Well, speaking of grapefruit, when I saw the huge mob in front of the show I thought Santa Claus had delivered it. Honest, it was the biggest crowd I had seen for ten years on the show lots, and I gave full credit to Hair-Oil Harrigan for his astute publicity methods.

Old Man Sullivan, face beaming like a African sunset, eels his way through the mob and slams Hair-Oil affectionately upon the back.

"Here's a real showman, Doc!" he ejaculates. "Why, Barnum, himself, couldn't of done any better!"

"The mere trifle," says Hair-Oil; "the mere trifle. But I hope, Mr. Sullivan, that you're glad you didn't let me and Cassidy go over to the Ginsburgh-McGinty outfit, huh?"

"Please don't mention them apes to me!" sputters the Old Man, and beats it away in the crowd.

Meantime, let's go inside the tent, and observe the big bust come off.

ON THE platform sits Cowboy Cassidy, surrounded by the various prizes donated by the jeweler, the shoe merchant, the clothier, whilst directly behind the platform stands the niftiest-looking flivver that ever rattled out of Detroit. Attached to each prize was a sign, informing the world that it would be given free to any one who succeeded in making Cassidy smile, under which statement was the name of the local merchant who donated it.

Well, sir—or ma'am—when Side-Trap reached Cassidy's platform he's all primed to make the spiel of his life. Hair-Oil had tipped him off that the merchants, themselves, would be in the audience and for him to scatter a few kind words about their big hearts and generosity. So when Side-Trap came to that part, he naturally smothered the donators with assorted gimgoo, and congratulated the natives on having such fine-spirited gents in their midst. Meanwhile, Mr. Cassidy sits upon his throne as calm and sober as a mummy.

"Aw right!" concludes Side-Trap, after agitating the air for a half hour. "You folks will now have your chance to win the grand and glorious prizes. Just think of 'em! A two-caret diamond ring; a complete set of new clothing, including shoes, and the snappiest-looking Ford sport model sedan on earth. And don't forget the added one thousand dollars—in cash—offered by the management! Already, Mr. Cassidy?"

"Already, Mr. Simpkins," yawns the dumb wonder.

Promptly about twenty men and fifty ladies started to try their luck simultaneously—and all we heard was static.

"One at a time, folks!" bellers Side-Trap. "One at a time!"

No can do! Instead of quieting down, the din becomes worse and, during the frantic attempts to attract Cassidy's attention, one lad socks another customer on the button. Seeing that this would soon work up to a general riot, me and Side-Trap take the rough boys by the pants and tossed 'em out under the side-wall. And then it got down to business.

Silently and grimly, a small chap begins to plow his way through the mob, knocking folks to the right and the left, until he reaches the edge of the platform.

"Hey you!" he whoops at Side-Trap.

"If you'll let me come up on that platform, I'll guarantee to make that flatfoot laugh until he shimmies. How about it?"

Before replying, Side-Trap naturally looks down at me for advice and counsel, a thing I'm full of. As the lad looked less than harmless, I wave my hand, giving Side-Trap the office to permit the towner to come up.

"The manager of this show says it will be okay for you to mount the platform and try your luck," says Side-Trap. "But I want the gen-tle-mun to bear in mind—if he has one—that he must not touch Mr. Cassidy in any shape, form, or manner. If he does, I'll attend to him personal!"

"Okay by me," says the bozo. "Here, give me a hand up on this raft!"

Side-Trap grabs him by the neck and yanks him to the platform.

"Now, folks, I bet you don't know who I am," he goes on.

"You wouldn't be Coolidge or Columbus, would you?" mocks Side-Trap, winking at the audience.

"Cancel the quack wit," purrs the stranger. "Before I proceed with the proceedings, I will ask Mr. Cassidy if *he* knows who I am?"

"Shore do," replies Cassidy. "You can't fool me—you're Jack the Giant Killer. How's business in the bean-stalk game?"

"If that's the best joke you can think up, no wonder your map looks dead!" parries the bright boy.

"Never mind the pushing around!" snaps Side-Trap impatiently. "Do your stuff, or give the other folks a chance."

"Okay by me. I now take pleasure in introducing myself. I am no less than Omar Bey McGurk, and I will confess immediately that I admit I'm the world's greatest psychic scientist and hypnotist. How's that for a bolt of lightning?"

"Boloney!" booes Side-Trap. "You couldn't hypnotise a quart of hip-syrup."

"Don't kid yourself," begs the professor. "How the so ever, I will be glad to give you and the folks a chance to see my delicate art in action."

Right then was the time that I should of signalled Side-Trap to toss the dizzy chump off the platform; but like Side-Trap I thought the fella was a load of free air, mostly hot.

"Now, kind folks," he blaahs on, "I give you one and all an opportunity to observe how easy a clever guy can cop them prizes. I just hate to see 'em go to waste, no fooling."

The next moment the genial gent leaps in front of Cassidy and begins to shimmy his hands in front of the dumb wonder's face.

"Stare at me with your eyes!" he raves. "You can't move! You can't think! You can't even move your arms or legs!"

"So's your elderly parent," drawls Cassidy, with his usual well-bred yawn.

"Sleep!" whinnies Omar Bey McGurk. "I command you to rest and sleep!"

"Who d'yer take me for—Rip Van Winkle?" demands Cassidy, but at the same time I note with alarm that he begins to look the bit goofy.

"Sleep! Sleep! You are about to enter the Kingdom of Morpheus! You are passing under my complete control. Rest! Sleep! Rest!"

At this point Cassidy droops his head, whilst I droop my heart. Not so good, what I mean!

"Ah, ha!" gloops the professor, "Mr. Cassidy has decided to take it easy. Perfect!"

I BEGIN to sense that the thing is becoming serious, and was about to give the office to Side-Trap to stall it off, when I get a peek at the joyous and tense faces of the mob. The audience, in a case like this, are always against the show, and with any guy who can beat 'em, life and human nature being what it is. And it is. Anyway, I knew that I couldst stop the tide of the ocean with the palm of my hand just as easy as I could stop the work of Mons. McGurk.

"Well, well, well!" croaks the professor, rubbing his hands. "So I'm good, am I not? If this guy ain't under my complete control, kind folks, what is he? Seeing that he is, I shall put him through his paces."

"What d'yer intend to do?" demands Side-Trap, somewhat dizzy himself.

"Just tell this lad a funny story, and make him laugh," replies Professor McGurk.

"Go to it, professor!" yelps a pleased patron. "The main idea is to grab the loot. Atta boy!"

"Now, Brother Cassidy," continues the

lad, "I am going to tell you the newest and best joke on the market. Are you listening? You bet your pyjamas you are! And long before I finish this great joke you will be laughing your head off. Now listen! *Once upon a time there was two Irishmen. One's name was Pat and the other's name was Mike—*"

That was all, boys and girls, that was all. He merely starts to tell the same wheeze that Adam passed along to Eve. And—

Wham!

"Ha ha ha!" cackles Cassidy—the big stiff! "Gosh, tha's sure a funny one! Haw haw haw! Say, I ain't heard anything as good as that since—"

Within the next few moments, plenty things happened, and I don't mean I just think so! First, the mob goes cock-eyed with joy, and begins to shout and toss hats in the air.

"Give the man the prizes!" whoops five hundred voices. "He wins! He wins—"

Next, the lad who had donated the sport model flivver lets out a whinny of grief and proceeds to collapse at my feet. At about the same time, Mr. Abe O'Levy, the kind hearted jeweler who had offered the two-caret diamond ring, claps his hands to his head, and moans, "Oy! dot dope! Is diss a business?" And just to add more interest to the debacle, Old Man Sullivan chances to walk in, hear the glad tidings of great gloom, and begin to foam at the mouth.

"Well, I'll be damned!" is his first contribution. "The pie-eyed sap! Did he *really* laugh, Doc? Tell me it ain't so! Oh, the big tramp! One grand! I'm out one whole grand! Oh, the big—"

Stick around for another few minutes, and then we can both go to sleep.

After Professor Omar Bey McGurk had collected all the prizes, including the thousand bucks from the Old Man—which broke his heart in ninety-seven pieces—I ambled back to the hotel, accompanied by a complete set of headaches. I was heading for my usual room, when the clerk halts me.

"I hope you won't mind, Mr. McKeezick," he says, "but we've started to renovate some of the rooms, including yours, and I would esteem it a favor if you would take Number 24, on the third floor. Thank you."

"Okay," I says. "And I don't mind if the hotel falls on my head."

Twenty minutes after I had entered my new coop, I hear a few familiar voices in the adjoining room. Although it's always been a hobby of mine to attend strictly to my own knitting, there's something about them voices that held my undivided attention. Just get a load of this, as it floats in over the transom:

"Pretty soft, hey?" remarks a voice, and *that* voice was Hair-Oil Harrigan's.

"Speaking of anchovies," gloats another guy, "what d'yer think of me as a quack hypnotist?" And *that* voice belongs to Omar Bey McGurk.

"How about *me?*" gloops another voice, belonging to Mr. Cowboy Cassidy. "Didn't I laugh at the right time—just as we rehearsed it? And for a ex-plumber, didn't I act the part of a cowboy to perfection? Gents, I admit it!"

A fine trinity of bandits!

WITHOUT waiting to hear anymore sad news, I tip-toes out the room, races down the stairs with more speed than I thought I had, and flies out the door. I got some important news, and you just know it!

One block from the hotel, I am lucky enough to bump into Old Man Sullivan, the very bird I'm looking for.

"Quick!" I hisses. "Ask no questions and follow me like hell!"

"What the—" begins Sullivan, but I grab him by the hand and rush him back to the hotel.

"You are about to hear some tasty news!" I pants, as we ease quietly into the room. "S-hh!—just flap forward your ears and listen to what comes over the transom."

The Old Man obeys orders, and is rewarded with this parcel of static:

"You can have the ring," says Cassidy, "and me and Hair-Oil will divvy up the flivver. It will come in handy when we go touring down to Florida next Fall."

"How about all this clothing, and other junk?" demands Hair-Oil.

"You can have it for thinking up the plot," says Cassidy. "What say, Professor?"

"Okay by me," says the professor. "Meanw'ile les' divvy up that pretty little thousand. Did you get it changed into twenty-buck bills like we all agreed on?"

"Tens," says Hair-Oil. "The bank didn't have no twenties to spare. Well, les' go! Here's ten for you and here's ten for me—here's ten for you, and here's ten for—"

The Old Man begins to shiver with rage at my side. His eyes blaze like a three-alarm fire, whilst sparks shoot out of his whiskers. The boy was fit to be tied!

"So *that's* the racket, hey?" he foams. "Oh, the dirty crooks! Framed up on Ike Sullivan, did they? I'll show them big bums! Wait here a moment, Doc, I got some important business to attend to in the next room!"

The Old Man removes his coat, hat, collar and tie, then speedily rolls up his sleeves, and blows out. A second later I hear some new broadcasting. Tune-in on this:

"Here's one for you—*bam*—and here's one for you—*sock*—and here's one for you—*wham*—and the next time you dizzy burglars pull a fast one on Ike Sullivan you'll become a treat for the undertaker!"

Presently the Old Man returns to my room, covered with glory, smiles an perspiration. In his chubby hands, he's clutching a whole bevy of ten dollar bills.

"Well, that's that!" he grins. "I got some neat exercise, and all *they* did was take it in the eye."

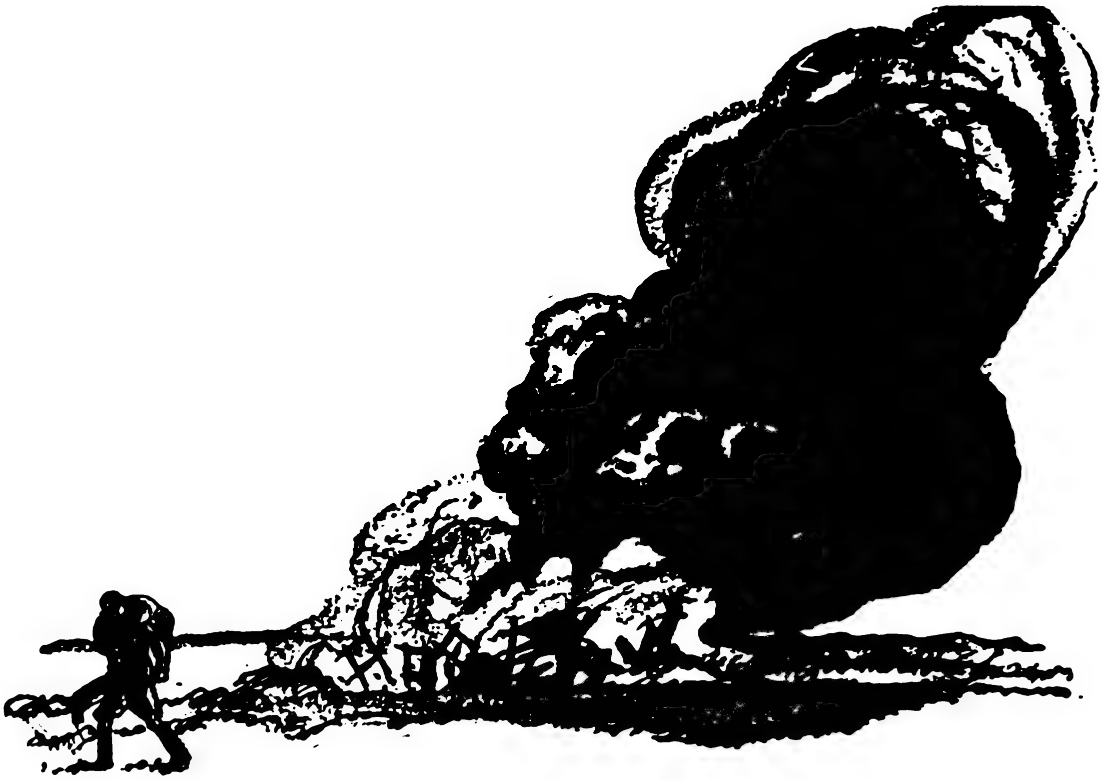
"Business seems to be good," I says, pointing at the bills.

"Not so bad," he admits. "But if it wasn't for your quiet tip, Doc, all I'd have would be a headache. How about dishing yourself out a hundred of this reclaimed loot?"

"Thanks," I says. "But the guy who really deserves the reward is the hotel clerk. If he hadn't innocently switched my room I wouldn't of got wise at all."

"In that case," says Old Man Sullivan, "I can spare another hundred for him!"

The show's over.



Thomson Burtis

Gives Us Another Glorious
Adventure of the Air in—

But A First Class FIGHTING MAN

STRANGE as it may seem, my entire acquaintance with Lieutenant Rex Croyden extended over but forty-eight hours. That little period of time, however, included more assorted surprises and larger gobs of low and lofty wondering than any similar period in my somewhat ebullient existence. I had the feeling when first my peepers came to rest on his good-looking pan that he was a bit out of the ordinary. Three hours later I awakened to the fact that I'd been right for once in my life. And the next day—well, brethren, struggle on and you'll discover, if you survive, that I—I being Lieutenant John Evans of the Army Air Service—occasionally can see through a ladder if the rungs are far enough apart.

It all happened at Donovan Field, which, in those booming war times, was the largest flying field in the world. When I first set eyes on it I figured that the state of Texas, supposedly a tidy-sized strip of land, had been turned over to airplanes.

Before going into the story, however, I might as well introduce myself in a bit more detail. Then I can retire into the background and let Rex take the center of the stage.

Probably, when you know I was a flyer, you've got a mental picture of one of these clothing advertisement boys who pose in front of their ships, his leather coat falling in correct and graceful folds above his perfectly fitting breeches and his highly polished boots. His handsome face, outlined by his helmet, is strong and superior. With one hand he gracefully holds a cork-tipped cigaret while he gazes condescendingly on the army of luscious wenches who are mooning worshipfully at him.

Well, you're wrong. My nickname through the army was "Slim," and the only reason I can think of for the name was that I was six feet six inches tall, and so thin that standing twice in the same place was necessary for me to make a shadow. My outstanding physical features were my nose, my feet, and my hands, all of them of prodigious size. The sight of my pipe-stem legs rising from my feet reminded one of a sapling growing in the middle of a large-sized field. When I stepped out of my ship, in that steaming Texas climate, I was usually arrayed in stained breeches below an undershirt which was speckled with black, and my oil-grimed snoot peered forth at the world below string brown hair. I never wore a helmet.

In other words, I was far from the answer to even a maiden lady's prayer. I'm an ex-cow puncher from the state of Utah who served as a private in the Mexican unpleasantness and finally, through the good offices of an uncle, who was guilty of being a senator, got into the air service. I'm almost as dumb as I look, but the gods smile at me. I sort of stumble awkwardly into trouble and get out of it in the manner of a bull getting out of a china shop, but somehow always get through an emergency with my neck intact but my body and mind badly sprained and my pride non-existent.

I'd been overseas, met a couple of German planes one nice morning, and ended up in one of our own trenches, full of glory and bullets. I was sent back to this country, and after recovering was assigned as an instructor at Donovan Field. I'd shot down one German I hadn't got credit for, and got credit for one Boche plane that I hadn't shot down, leaving me a net of one festive flyer to hang to my belt.

So it was that at four o'clock one July morning in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighteen, dawn just breaking, I strode meditatively out on the line where more than a hundred airplanes were drawn up in a formation which paralleled the mile-long row of shining white hangars. In those hectic days Donovan Field was trying to turn out flyers faster than Ford does flivvers. And in the good old summer time the air around noonday was entirely too light to hold up the ninety horse Jennies which were the training planes. Trying to fly in it was like walking on the water. Consequently they had generated the idea of flying from dawn until ten thirty, and then resuming at five in the afternoon and oozing through the ozone until dark.

That accounted for the fact that more than a hundred Curtiss motors were roaring away on the warmup, their exhaust pipes sending great spurts of fire stabbing through the semi-darkness. And that hour in the morning accounted, partly, for the fact that my disposition, none too good at any time, was below normal.

There were other reasons which caused the bellowing of the motors against my ear to be far from a pleasant sound. One was that I'd been a bit nervous the night before, and had taken a few peeps at the wine when it was pink. The result was one of those tastes in the mouth which you've all experienced at one time or another.

The second was that, for the time being, I was a dual instructor. That job, gents, means that you take a bunch of strangers who've never been off the ground, and try to teach 'em to navigate around the field without killing themselves. It involves climaxes, emergencies and problems which are enough to make a statue quiver. Some time or another you've got to sit in the front seat, hands in the air, and let a man in the back seat whom you *think* knows something dive you at the ground—and hope he'll level out in time. No matter how hard an airplane hits, for some reason or another the earth doesn't give way to any appreciable extent. My job was supposed to be advanced instruction on big ton-and-a-half De Havilands and fast little scouts, but as I said I was, temporarily, a dual instructor.

To lend the last touch to this benighted morning, it marked the day when I was to start a new bunch of would-be flyers through the mill. I'd completed one herd of four men, one of whom seemed to be blind, another so excitable that he was a rambling wreck when he was in the air and shook so that his hand on the stick made the ship do a shimmy, and a third so fat-headed he couldn't learn anything. With that mob behind me, can you blame me for looking the new quartet with a dour look in my od eye?

THERE they were, on one of the benches which dotted the line. In front of them my ship, with Sergeant ooley in the cockpit and a mechanic of the ew holding to each wing, was just com-leting the warmup. The two-seated train-g plane was straining against the wheel-locks as though as anxious to be gone as I as to remain on the ground.

The four men stood at attention as I gal-ped up to them. One of them, as I'd nown from the list in my hand, was an nfantry officer, transferred to the Air ervice. The others were eager cadets, razy—and crazy enough—to fly.

It was to the officer, Rex Croyden, that y eyes fastened. For no particular reason, t first, but somehow as I said my piece I ound new things to interest me in him.

In the first place, he was one of these icture aviators I spoke about. His lothes fitted him as though he'd been oured into 'em and allowed to harden, and could have combed my hair in his boots ithout getting the part crooked. His ap was set at a jaunty, devil-may-care ngle on his cranium, and seemed to lend last touch of mocking recklessness to his ce.

That front piece was a lean, dark, hawk-osed affair, and beneath said proboscis a ide, slightly thin, tight-lipped mouth was ulled down at one corner as though sneer-g at the world. His eyes, straight and ng and narrow, rested on mine steadily, d it seemed that there was a private beam sardonic enjoyment in each of them. here were about three very slight scars stributed over that face, one of them ar the corner of his right eye. It seemed have pulled that eye and black eyebrow own a trifle, completing the slightly one-ded tinge to his face and increasing im-easurably the sort of saturnine mockery it. He looked like a hard-boiled egg ho'd seen a lot and laughed a little con-mptuously at all he'd seen.

I called the roll and got them labeled by eir right names. The cadets answered eathlessly—they were about to start ying, and I was the guy who could make m or break 'em, and likewise the bird in hose hands their lives were placed. If my gment missed fire and I told one of 'em to solo too soon, he'd be shoveled up from the field. Another point which makes the dual instructing job one which a professional hangman might refuse.

"Today you each get a joyride," I barked briefly. "Just get used to the air, and all that. I may let you handle the stick a little while when we get high, but that's all. Just look around and get used to being up. Any of you ever had a ride before?"

They all shook their heads.

"Lieutenant, I'll take you first," I informed him.

It had grown lighter, and here and there up and down the line some ships were turning, each of them with two hooded figures in the cockpits, and taxying out on the field to take off. These were the ships which were bound for the extra fields laid out around Donovan itself. These pastures were devoted to advanced stages of flying to which the cadets graduated after we poor devils of dual instructors had soloed them.

As we walked toward my ship I stopped, out of earshot of the cadets, and ignited a cheroot.

"You're a first lieutenant," I informed Croyden after a look at his bars, "and I'm a shavetail. That, however, doesn't mean a damn thing. I don't know you, of course, and I'm merely saying this as a matter of information. While I'm your instructor, I rank you as much as though I was two grades above John J. Pershing. From the minute we step on this flying field until we're off again, you do exactly as I say. Right?"

I had the peculiar idea that he was laughing at me, inside, when he nodded and his lips widened in a sort of mirthless smile.

"I understand that," he stated, and his English was so meticulous and precise that he seemed to be speaking with an effort. Another rather startling thing about him I might mention. His hair and eyebrows were black as night, but his eyes were a very light gray. His skin, I think, was slightly swarthy to begin with, and had been tanned into a leathery hue. Those eyes were like two pale lights in the back of his head.

"Far be it from me," he went on, "to address a flying instructor with anything but the greatest respect."

I make no excuses for myself, I've never been noted for turning the left cheek after having been smitten on the right, and I was feeling, as I've explained, as though if I lived the next hour I'd live forever. So what I seemed to discern in his attitude caused me to blow up with a loud report.

"Listen here, Loot," I rasped. "I don't like what you said a damn bit, nor the way you said it. It so happens that my neck is damn valuable to me, and a smart guy in the back seat can easily break it for me. That means that the Angel Gabriel takes orders from me if I'm flying him, and by —— I don't want any sneers when I speak my piece! Any time you think you're above taking orders from me say so and get fired, but don't be trying to get away with any veiled insinuations! And now that it comes to a point, besides taking orders from me and liking it, respect is thrown in!

"You're just a cadet to me, and I'm your instructor, and you don't climb up on those silver bars and stand any higher with me than one of those raggedy kaydets. Get that?"

Somehow he seemed as hard and unyielding as a chunk of granite. As I bawled him out I felt as though my words were like so many pebbles from a pea shooter rebounding from the Rock of Gibraltar. And what made me madder was that he still seemed to be laughing. But his words were venomous as he said slowly:

"You're making a damn fool of yourself. I'll obey your orders where flying is concerned, but don't try to exceed your authority, Evans! It's in your power to break me as a flyer—but don't go too far!"

Right there I lost my head completely. I took a step toward him, and my face was within inches of those hard eyes as I snarled:

"If you insinuate that I'd break you because I didn't like you, I'll kick hell out of you right here on this line if they cashier me for it! Take that back, Croyden, or by ——"

"Consider it unsaid," he slid in quietly, that funny gleam in his eyes.

He was still mocking me, and I knew it. He left me a fuming, puzzled, furious boob who didn't know what to do or why. So I beat a retreat by saying:

"Let's go. But any time you try to be a first lieutenant in the air will be the last time you get in the air. And the next time you try your sneer when I lay down the law on this flying field, you're going to get it wiped off.

"All right, Sergeant. Remember two things, Croyden. First, keep your hands on the cowling. Second, keep your feet the floor and off that rudder. You do touch the controls on this first trip."

"Yes, sir," he returned, and I felt l hitting him!

AS WE climbed into the cockpits—me front—I was so mad I could hav eaten the motor for a sandwi Part of the reason for it was that I su pected that I'd made more or less of a dam fool of myself. I admitted it to myself, ev then. Bear in mind that I'm giving you t real lowdown—I'm not one of these han some heroes who is never wrong, could li the heavy-weight champion with my litt finger, win a war singlehanded, and am pu as the snow on a convent roof. I'm j an awkward, dumb, human boll-bus who makes more mistakes than the avera

The air was now full of droning shi Dozens of them flew out of sight to o lying fields, as I taxied out on the great tw mile-square expanse which was Donow Field. By the time I'd swung into the wi a dozen ships were starting to circle the fie swooping down for practice landings on e ery round, and there were enough ships the ground to make the takeoff a matter sharp looking around to avoid hitting a body. I took a last look at the instrume —oil pressure, temperature, tachomete and made sure my belt was fastened. Th I shoved the throttle forward, pushed f ward on the stick, set my feet against rudder, and we were off.

I tried to get rid of some of my wr by holding the ship within a few feet of ground for the entire distance across field, and then zooming. Zooming one those ninety horsepower Jennies, which ha to be nosed down in order to bank with losing altitude, is probably as foolish flying feat as anybody ever tried, but I a little satisfaction out of setting her up her tail and not leveling out until she starting to stall.

I circled the field a few times for altitu keeping a sharp watch out for other shi Several of those roaring planes held but passenger—that meant that some cad were soloing. And if you think it's pleas to share the air with a bunch of flyers haven't had six hours, total, in said et you're crazy.

Finally I got to a thousand feet, hundred feet above the ever-circling s below. The hangars were mere blotches against the ground, and the ships dotting the field were like crawling bugs, San Antonio, four miles away, didn't look to be three hundred yards square, and the cars along the roads were like dots on a white ribbon.

I glanced back at Croyden, and became considerably surprised. He had none of the usual first-ride symptoms. His hands weren't gripping the cowling as though life itself depended on it. His eyes, behind the goggles, hadn't changed. His body wasn't tense, strained forward in the seat.

He was leaning back, as relaxed as I was myself, and his hands rested easily on the leather cowling. He was looking down with a rather bored air, holding his goggles occasionally as the terrific airstream, compounded of the seventy mile an hour speed and the propeller wash, tried to rip them from his eyes.

A cool customer, without a doubt.

"He's the kind who wouldn't walk across the street to see the King of England fall off a high bicycle," I thought to myself.

Ahead of me, and between my ship and the radio stage, I noted a plane, flying at right angles to our course. It was about five hundred yards ahead of us, and at about the same altitude, now fifteen hundred feet. We'd miss it by a good many feet, and I thought no more about it except to keep an eye on it.

Which is where I cut out again, showing that liquor stingeth like a bumblebee and biteth like a cootie. Between stewing over my little battle with Croyden, and cursing the way I felt, I was sure suffering with mental constipation.

The other ship was a couple of hundred feet to our left, flying away from us, as we crossed behind its tail. The next instant it seemed to me that all hell had broken loose.

There came a shattering crash, and at the same instant the roar of the eight cylinder motor became a frenzied, mumbling cross between a scream and a bellow. The ship quivered and shook in every strut and spar, and the motor seemed to be jumping out of the ship.

As my hand automatically darted for the throttle, to cut it off, I realized what had happened. That had been a radio ship, off its reservation, and it had been trailing its long wire antenna behind it. We'd run into the metal fish at the end of the cable, and it had broken the prop.

That didn't take a tenth of a second to penetrate my bean. Almost at the same instant something hit me a terrific blow on the head. During the seconds when I fought desperately for consciousness a hundred things sort of battered at my dazed brain. A piece of the propeller had hit me—I was bleeding, reeling in my seat, the world going round in circles before my eyes. It seemed that the sky was a whirling mass of mist, splotched with blood.

I must stay conscious. That was all I could think of. If I didn't, the ship would fall out of control, of course—

For five seconds, or more, I fought the fight of my life. Nauseated, unable to see for the blood gushing over my goggles, and behind them, I was not even sane. The ship was rocking and slipping all over the sky—*I must* pull myself together—

Suddenly I knew that I could not. I felt myself slipping into dreamland. I fought it like a drowning man does the water engulfing him, but I couldn't win. It was curtains for Slim Evans, and Croyden—that I knew just before I went completely blotto.

There was just one impression—hallucination, if you will—which I realized as I went under. It seemed as though the ship was lying level, all of a sudden, and that the world was tranquil and restful and blessedly quiet. Death didn't seem so bad.

WELL, I woke up at precisely ten thirty. And my popping optics did not rest upon the beard of St. Peter, nor yet upon the horns of the devil. It took what I jokingly call my mind a full ten seconds to realize the fact that I was gazing into the blue eyes of Sandy Shore, my red-headed, freckle-faced, snub-nosed roommate, and that I was ensconced in my own bed, with a bandage over my temple and a headache worse than the morning after a mescal mêlée.

Sandy's broad shoulders shook, and his stocky body bent over with mirth.

"You didn't get killed, damn it," he chuckled. "Funny how you cheat the morgue every other day or so. Now ask 'where am I'—"

"I know where I am," I managed to say, "but how come?"

"Croyden brought the ship down!" Sandy told me hilariously. "He's top kick of this field now! Say, old boy, do you know you missed the damnedest ride any man ever had in an airplane? That baby can do more stunts trying to fly straight than you could on purpose! But to think you got a guy with the guts to bring a plane down on his first flight and make it at all—"

"Didn't he even wreck?" I interrupted, and you could have knocked my eyes off with a stick, they stuck out so far.

"Sure! And the ship caught fire and everything! He saved your sinful life twice handrunning—"

"Sandy, my boy," I begged humbly, "limber up your tongue, which it doesn't need, and begin where it commences and leave off where it stops, with no skipping."

"You might be interested, at that," Sandy granted with a grin. "Well, you know you broke your prop on a radio fish, and that you got knocked cuckoo by one of the pieces. This bird Croyden took hold. Everybody was watching, including me, because when the engine raced for a second it made the most God awful racket you ever heard.

"The ship started in a spin, but he grabbed it in time and by pure dumb luck hauled her up. Then it started—nose high in the air, then in a dive. It fell all around the sky like a drunken dragon fly. By this time we all knew something had happened to you, and we could tell that a kaydet had it in charge.

"Well, it came within a few inches of colliding with two or three ships. Finally it got close to that water tower near hangar sixteen. It was going right for it in a hell of a dive. At the last minute Croyden hauls back on the stick, and sort of stalled, and she fell off into a sideslip. Down she comes, left wing down, right for hangar sixteen. Again at the last minute this Croyden bird got it, and this time you bounced on the roof of the hangar. You went out over the field, just missed all those De Havilands lined up on the line, and hit the ground right side up.

"She bounced again. How she didn't break a wheel I don't know. You bounced three or four times, and finally the ship tipped over, and came down right wing first.

"It was a hell of a wreck, and the gas line must have sprung a leak. The motor caught fire, and you were right close to it, all hemmed up in wreckage that was starting to smoke. Croyden flails into it, and just as the ambulance got there he staggered out with you. His clothes were smoking, one arm badly burned, and your shirt-sleeve was afire. He rolls you in the grass, and as the ambulance arrives keels over himself. Quite a lad, Croyden, quite a lad!"

"Your position," I told him vaguely, "seems to be well taken. Well I'll be damned! I sure thought we were up a thousand feet and going to dive eleven hundred, that time! And he got down safe on his first ride, and then rescues me from the burning bush! Well I'll be damned!"

"And there's nothing the matter with you!" crowed Sandy. "Think of that! A little bump over one eye, but tomorrow you can again be at the work you love so well—"

"Go to hell and let me think," I told him, which he did.

And I thought plenty. Talk about nerve! Say, if you think I could have brought a ship down on my first ride—or twentieth, for that matter—you're all wrong. If you think one man out of a million could, you'd be willing to believe that a one-legged man could make a new record for the hundred yard dash. It was a miracle, that's what it was—and miracles are hard for me to believe. Yet I'd sized up this bozo Croyden as a man of nerve and ability.

Then there was that queer hallucination about the ship suddenly coming under control just before I went bye-bye. But Croyden had stated that he'd never been in the air before.

It bothered me a little, being naturally of a curious turn of mind, and I couldn't get it out of my head all day long. At five o'clock I was in shape to take up my bed and walk, and naturally I made straight for Croyden's quarters. I'd been holding a reception all day long, but he hadn't come near.

Just about every one was at the officers' club eating dinner, except those who were flying the night shift, and I was going to ask Croyden to eat with me. I walked down in back of the first line of officers' quarters, paralleling the road which split the hangars from the other buildings. I opened the screen door of the back porch and shut it quietly, in case any one within was asleep, and tiptoed to the kitchen. Bachelors in the army never knock at each other's doors, and no quarters are ever locked.

I tiptoed across the kitchen, and just as my hand was on the doorknob of the door into the sitting room I heard low voices, so I opened it casually. As I did so I heard the word "De Haviland," and my somewhat surprised eyes rested on Croyden, all togged out in a royal purple dressing gown, conversing with an enlisted man. He was evidently a mechanic as he was dressed in blue denim overalls.

When I hove into sight it seemed to me that mechanic was so startled that he was half way out of his skin. He looked at me for a second, wide-eyed and tense. He was a stocky, swarthy chap with a stubble of beard on his chin and big, glowing, turbulent-looking brown eyes.

Even the icy Croyden seemed to stiffen in his chair, and those gray lamps in his head shone forth with cool, dancing glints in them. They were peculiar, those eyes. I felt as though his face and body were artificial and lifeless—that the eyes were those of some other person, peering through slits in a mask.

"Oh, hello, Evans," Croyden said finally, and the mechanic leaped to his feet, as though the words had released him from some spell. He stood at rigid attention.

"Meet Private Navarro," Croyden went on with that curiously stilted English of his. "War does peculiar things—Mr. Navarro, back in New York, is the son of a millionaire importer, and his brother is one of my best friends."

"Glad to know you," I told him. "And please don't let that 'attention' business last any longer than you can help. Was I interrupting something—"

"No, sir!" Navarro assured me, the words fairly tumbling out of his mouth. "I was just going."

"We were talking over a certain—er—personal problem connected with his brother," Croyden slid in smoothly, "and as it is I'm afraid you've missed mess call, Jack."

AS NAVARRO said good-by with a certain grand manner I remember wondering just what De Haviland airplanes had to do with the personal problems of a wealthy young man in New York, but for the time being I forgot that. As Navarro left I looked Croyden straight in the eye and, despite the gleam I saw there, came straight to the point.

"Croyden, you brought us down safely—which was something that makes any of the biblical exploits of Joshua and the rest look like parlor tricks. Great work. But I'm told that you waded into the fire, when the gas tank was liable to explode at any instant, and saved my life. I salute your guts, Croyden, say thank you, and that's about all I can say."

I thrust out my hand, and he shook it without moving from his chair. All the time he was scrutinizing me as though I was some new freak which he had just discovered.

"Thank you," he said finally, and then his lips widened a bit in a smile, as though waiting for me to say something else. Which I did, floundering helplessly as I tried to get my sentiments across to him. Outside the planes were droning overhead, and all the time there was, in the back of my mind, the remembrance of the feeling I'd had up in the air.

"Regarding our little spat this morning," I told him, "I'm sorry. I felt like hell, and that grin of yours I figured a sort of supercilious smirk that got my goat. I didn't know you—but I know now that you've earned the right to do a little low and lofty smirking if you so desire. I—er I—"

For the first and last time during our brief but tempestuous acquaintance he laughed, a silent, somehow mirthless laugh.

"Just why should anything I might have done make me any more desirable or attractive an acquaintance?" he inquired. "I presume that if you knew I was good to my mother I could sneer with impunity. I realize that you are thankful that your life was saved, but you need feel under no necessity to make me a bosom friend, you know. And I don't see that what I did changes the events of the morning at all."

Wasn't that a cool, hardboiled speech? His carefully formed words were like so many pieces of ice clinking in a glass.

"I'm not trying to kiss you," I informed him, "but I do admire guts. And I'll say more. You're a new man here and maybe don't know the boys yet. I'll be glad to sort of ease you into society, as it were. How about having dinner with me over at the club, and then a little later, if you like poker, there's a session scheduled at my house where you can meet part of the gang."

He did not answer, immediately, and I felt that he was going to refuse, flatly. Maybe he felt he was too good for the rest of us, I remember thinking, and perhaps some of the resentment I was beginning to feel at his conceited aloofness showed in my eyes. His own gaze probed into mine, and suddenly he relaxed.

"I'll be glad to have dinner with you," he announced calmly, "but count me out afterward. I've got a lot of writing to do. Not that I wouldn't be glad to get acquainted, later on. How about waiting for dinner, though, until the dining room is not too full?"

I understood that he wanted to dodge the complimentary looks, allusions and slaps on the back which might come his way. Indeed, a peculiar duck—a jolly peculiar duck.

Well, between then and the time, a couple of hours later, when we separated and I went forth to gamble on the green cloth spread over the table in my quarters, the close-mouthed Mr. Croyden succeeded in heightening the interest I already felt in him. He tried to avoid any confidences, but my busy tongue literally forced him into reluctant admissions of one kind or another. He was a man of wide and catholic experience, if ever there was one. He knew Mexico like a book, and had spent a number of years in Europe. He betrayed an extraordinary knowledge of the oil business, in which he had been engaged in Mexico as a chemist, and also accurate information on other things ranging from Broadway shows to the difference, in hobo parlance, between a gaycat and a baggage stiff.

As was natural, I came back to the landing of the morning several times, but he didn't want to talk about it at all.

"Why remind one's self of disagreeable experiences," he inquired. "What a nightmare that was!"

Three times I almost called him a liar when he said that he'd never been up before. That was because of his expression and attitude, I guess. Damn these mysterious bozoes who always seem to be laughing at you, and whom you can never be sure of when they speak. It's an uncomfortable feeling to wonder whether you're being laughed at.

I couldn't entirely forget to wonder about him during the game, and as a result three of the boys started to take me over. I had to pull myself together and play like hell for an hour to come out even. Then I went to bed, and decided once more that miracles had not ended with the bearded boys in the Bible.

ON THE flight with Croyden next morning I gave him the stick when we got up to four thousand feet, signaling him with my hands in order to keep the ship approximately on an even keel. As happened, of course, with every cadet at first, he overcontrolled. Handling the stick of an airplane is sort of like walking a tightrope—you keep busy every second moving it around to compensate for wind, air bumps, and what not. The stick rarely needs to be moved more than a quarter of an inch, and for several hours the would-be flyers jam it around wildly. When the left wing tips up, they shoot the stick over so far that the right one is high in the air, then go back again, too far, and a flight with them is a mixture of riding a bucking bronco, a ship at sea in a storm, an elevator and a scenic railway.

But of all the wild youngsters I'd had to ride with, Croyden was the worst. He overcontrolled more than any man I'd ever seen, and seemed unable to realize what it was all about. I tried to quiet him down, but there was no such thing possible. He went from a dive into a stall, fell into two spins, and in general showed that he knew nothing about handling a stick and was, apparently, the worst flying prospect I had ever seen.

Finally I took over the stick, and landed, thinking considerably. Several times I looked back at him, and despite his weird and terrible airmanship, his face had been composed. He looked cool and collected, and flew with more signs of mental disintegration than a non-swimmer threshing around trying to keep himself afloat.

If that safe landing with me had seemed a miracle before, it was absolutely unbelievable then.

I'm a curious and brassy guy, accustomed to direct methods and with about as much tact and finesse in my carcass as is possessed by the average traffic cop. My mind was unsettled. So I figured out a little stunt whereby I aimed to get straight in my mind concerning Croyden. If you're a non-flyer you cannot imagine the effect on a gent like myself of having awakened alive after that propeller had broken.

I pulled the stunt on the very next morning. I took Croyden up first, as usual.

"We'll get high again, and you can get accustomed to the stick," I told him. "Don't try to work the rudder at all yet—leave your feet flat on the floor. And try not to overcontrol so much. Keep cool, and move the stick a little at a time when it's necessary."

"Yes, sir," he answered, as he invariably did, and somehow the sir was a joke, as far as he was concerned, and I knew it.

I had performed certain operations on the ship earlier that morning. When we had got four thousand feet, over at the edge of the field, I made ready to give Mr. Croyden a bit of a tryout. The sun was just peeping over the eastern horizon, the air was cool and smooth, and all the ships for outlying fields had left Field 2. There were a dozen Jennies droning round and round the field, bearing cadets who were ready for landing practice, but in general the sky was clear of ships and the way as clear as it ever would be.

The stick, in a Jenny, is set into a metal socket, and held there by means of a pin, safetied by cotterpins. I had done some operating on it, as I mentioned. I aimed to find out whether, by any chance, Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans was being spoofed by his pupil.

I had not handed the ship over to his tender mercies when I leaned down for a second and got out the pin holding the stick in the socket. The next moment I was waving the stick in the air, my head turned toward him, my face counterfeiting terror as close as I could make it.

His eyes glowed suddenly. I made wild motions, and then cut the gun.

"My stick broke off!" I yelled. "Try to land her, for God's sake!"

I shoved the throttle on, and he took hold. I had my stick out of his sight, in the front cockpit.

He pushed his stick forward, and the Jenny went into a terrific dive. Motor full on, roaring louder and louder as it began to turn up beyond normal speed, it seemed that the propeller was bound to go to pieces. The wires were screaming, and the ship was quivering so that the struts were jumping in their sockets. I took hold of myself, and sat there grimly, motioning upward with my hands but swearing I'd not take hold until it would be sheer madness to let matters go farther.

Finally he pulled back. Slowly the ship came out of the dive, and the nose shot into the air. The ship was literally standing on its tail. It stalled, while I frantically motioned him to level it off.

Not a move did he make, hardly, and suddenly the nose dropped to the right. The next second, with me working the rudder, trying to keep it straight, it had gone into a slow spin. Nose down, we revolved on our fore-and-aft axis with ever increasing speed. Five hundred, a thousand feet we spun, while I cut the gun and tried to make my voice carry above the shrilling wires. I motioned, too.

"Shove the stick forward!" I bellowed. "Shove it forward!"

That's the funny thing about coming out of a spin. The nose is all the way down, and one would think that pulling back on the stick would be the proper manœuvre. How ever, the way to beat a spin is to push the stick all the way forward, and apply opposite rudder until it stops spinning and goes into a straight dive. Then pull out with the stick back.

But Croyden was doing what any amateur would do—holding the stick all the way back and thereby making the spin tighter and faster. I shouted frantically, made a thousand motions a minute, and stared into his eyes as the earth spun around us it seemed.

His eyes were glowing with a sort of cold brightness, and there was a wolfish grin on his thin-lipped face. He did not seem excited, outwardly, but he was inwardly if those eyes did not lie. His lips moved, but I could not hear what he was saying.

And he absolutely would not push the stick forward. Either he was too frightened to realize what I was getting at, or else he obstinately stuck to his amateur opinion that having the stick all the way back was the way to get that nose up.

I was a wreck when we got five hundred feet. I'd acted and shouted until I was exhausted. And I was getting a bit dizzy myself from that tremendous drop. We'd spun a full thirty-five hundred feet. I remember thinking that Croyden, by rights, should be sicker than a dog and dizzier than a sub-deb on a party, but there was no time for serious thinking then.

I got my stick back in the socket. By pressing down on it to keep it in, it was possible for me to handle the ship. I shoved it forward, relieved to find that Croyden did not have the controls frozen, and as I looked around triumphantly at him I got the Jenny into a flashing, but straight, dive. Pressing down on the stick with all my might as I eased it back, I sat and waited.

For a wild moment it seemed that my tryout of Croyden had been too artistic a one. The Jenny did not answer as I heaved backward, but finally it started out of the dive. I was afraid that the controls might snap in the terrific speed, but they did not. We swept level less than a hundred feet from the ground, and I lost no time in landing on the far edge of the field.

I had to keep up the bluff, of course, and flying around the field for a normal landing near the line would be a dead giveaway of my calm state of mind.

WHEN we had come to rest and the motor was idling along softly, I turned to him in mock fury.

"A hell of a flyer you're going to make!" I blared at him. "Didn't you see me motioning you to push the stick forward?"

His eyes rested steadily on mine, a peculiar appraising look in them.

"It didn't seem sensible, and I didn't know what I was doing," he told me calmly. As a matter of fact, he should have been a wreck. Sure death had stared us in the face, as far as he knew.

"What happened to us?" he inquired carefully. "You got it out—"

"I stuck the stick in the socket," I had to confess, "and by the grace of God we got out. I thought it was broken off, but it wasn't. Just came out."

He looked at me for a full ten seconds, and I was uncomfortable under it. Great ——, he was as calm and cool—

"Lucky you finally noticed that," he said coldly. "I scarcely see why you didn't know that at the start—"

"Maybe even instructors get excited sometimes," I shot back at him—and I felt like a little boy that had done something rotten.

"Funny how the stick should come out like that, too," he went on with a look at the control in his own cockpit. "I could understand a break, but not that. Pin came all the way out, eh? Was that the reason you bent down up there? Notice it then, I mean?"

"Of course not, or I wouldn't have thought in my excitement that it was broken off!" I yelled at him. "Let's get to the line!"

He had tried to trap me on that last inquiry, and I knew it. I, forsooth, was being subtly bawled out, laughed, blamed, by my pupil! If that contained bozo didn't know perfectly that I had been trying to find out whether or not his cadet-status was on the level, I was eligible to join a troupe of midgets.

I taxied to the line with my mind in a highly scrambled condition. I felt like a kid caught in mischief. I was ashamed of myself and of the lack of success which my stratagem had met with. The hell of it was that I was as much in the air about him as I had been before. I had a nasty feeling that his nerve had been equal to mine—that he'd outbluffed me.

For one thing, he hadn't had the normal reactions up there. He'd come out of that spin without being sick, and apparently as clear-headed as I was myself. He'd been excited somewhat, of course, but there had been a sort of ferocious joy, it seemed to me, discernible in his eyes while we were spinning down.

If he had been frightened, I couldn't swear to it.

The sarge had been in my confidence before the flight, and as we got out I told him:

"Pin in the stick came out, and it took me almost too long to find out I could land without it. Fix it up, and for God's sake inspect this ship once in a while, will you?"

I gave the crew in general a bawling out which sounded damn sincere because I felt like a fool under Croyden's disturbing gaze. When I had finished he was standing ten feet away from me, smoking a cigaret.

"Well, once again we're lucky, eh?" I remarked.

"So it seems," he said deliberately, that little trace of accent seemingly less obvious than usual."

His eyes rested on some ships further down the line.

"By the way, why don't they fly those De Havilands at all?" he asked casually.

My mind darted back, for no good reason, to the time, two days before, when I'd overheard him and Navarro mention De Havilands.

"They're supposed to be flown, and I'm supposed to be the bird who gives instruction on 'em to fellows who've just got their wings on Jenny's," I told him. "A couple of weeks ago, though, orders came out that D. H. instruction would be suspended—for what reason I know not. That's why I'm doing this damn dual-control stuff."

"I see. Thought maybe there was something the matter with them. May I be excused now, sir? I'm a bit unstrung—"

A bit unstrung! I could feel him laughing at me. But I told him "Sure!" and retired to my thoughts.

By the time I'd given the boys their lessons, and was through for a while, I'd made up my mind that one Rex Croyden would bear investigating. I'd worked myself to the point where I was sure it was a fifty fifty shot that he had previous flying experience of one kind or another. That remarkable first landing, his attitude that very morning, even his touch of accent and his mysterious conversation with the excited Navarro all combined to get me in a dime novel mood. Those being the piping days of war, I considered everything from his being a spy to a slight weakness in his head. If he was a spy he was going at it in a damn complicated way, I jeered at myself, and if he was a lunatic he was a highly developed one. It was all crazy, and I felt so Diamond Dickish that I was almost ashamed when I traveled to headquarters and had a slight chat with the adjutant, a very excitable major.

"Well, we will have him traced back—his record, and civilian experience as well as his references," nodded the major importantly, his mustache bristling. "The chances are, though, that if he did have previous flying experience he does not want to let it be known. If his progress is unusually fast, he wants full credit for it, eh?"

"It just struck me that his terrible flying yesterday might be put on," I told him. Honest, it was too terrible to be true. He overcontrolled his overcontrol, so to speak. A guy who was represented at his best in that flight couldn't have brought the ship down when I got knocked out except in one way, a nose dive or a spin, and I know it!"

"Maybe so. We'll see. We should have his record in hand by tomorrow."

It so happened that I was Officer of the Day starting at five that afternoon. Had I not been, I would have made a suggestion to the major. That suggestion would have been to have Croyden watched somewhat by the guards.

I was glad of a chance to do the first day's espionage on my own, though, because I was ashamed to suggest it without more evidence. One fact, however, stuck out in my mind like a lake in a desert:

If there was anything peculiar about Rex Croyden's relationship to the air service, there was a chance that he had plans which might be deleterious to said service. If that was true, it would be a cinch that he would try to consummate those plans as quickly as the Lord would let him, because he suspected that I suspected his own good faith.

Consequently, after I'd strapped on the official gun, signed the official papers, and unwound the other red tape connected with accepting the welfare of the field for twenty-four hours, I gave my guard details some instructions. On each shift I ordered the guards whose hangars were in the vicinity of Croyden's to watch his quarters, and inform me what, if any, visitors he had and where, if anywhere, he went if he came forth from his burrow. Maybe he had some other enlisted men friends like Navarro—if he had any intimates on the field I'd like to know about them.

If nothing happened, I'd stand the C. O.'s raucous laughter on the morrow and suggest further unobtrusive scrutiny of Croyden's affairs.

AT QUARTER past twelve I started on my next tour of inspection. Not a guard had had anything to report regarding my cadet. He was in his house, had had no visitors whatever, and the light had burned until eleven o'clock, which collection of facts had little sustenance for even a cuckoo amateur sleuth.

I found all the guards awake, a remarkable phenomenon, and those who talked English knew their orders, I found one, pacing his beat around two hangars, who spoke with an accent so thick it sounded like a new language.

It was a mile hike from Hangar 22 down to the guardhouse, and I flopped along easily, smoking a soothing cheroot and dreaming of taking a month's leave and spending it in some quiet retreat where there was nothing to do but drink Pluto and watch the sun go down. At half past two I was folded up on the guardhouse steps, still smoking, and wondering about the poker games scheduled for the following night. I had dismissed Croyden from my mind, for the moment.

My ears caught a low hum. Some car driving into the field at high speed. Drunk, probably.

Abruptly it increased in volume, and a second later I knew that more than one airplane was warming up far down the line of hangars.

Just exactly why I found myself leaping for the khaki-colored official flivver which stood by the guardhouse I don't know. It was just automatic action, I guess. But as I sent it careening down the road, and listened to the swelling roar of those ships it seemed that everything clicked into place in my mind. I jammed the accelerator to the floor, and flew from peak to peak of the rutted road.

For the full-throated roar which reached my ears was not that of a Jenny motor—it was the Gargantuan bellow of more than one twelve cylinder, four hundred and fifty horsepower Liberty. Had there been any orders for taking them out into the night I'd be first to know it.

There they went. Cursing steadily and artistically, I saw four of the great ton-and-a-half bombers streaking across the shadowed field, their exhausts trailing great streamers of flame. They were like fire-breathing monsters of the night, and I knew at that moment as well as I knew my own name that Rex Croyden was in one of them.

He was stealing army ships. He was a flyer, pretending not to be one. That was why he'd come down with me, bluffing lack of skill, of course. Navarro was probably one of his co-conspirators, planted as a mechanic. His accent, black hair, and swarthy skin—he was a Mexican, doubtless, or part Mexican. There was an element in Mexico which hated and feared the United States, and was strongly sympathetic with Germany. They were stealing army ships—the best we had on the field. Perhaps they were to be used against us—bombing, or something of that sort.

It was clear as crystal to me as I brought the car to a stop in front of Hangar 13. In army uniforms, it had been a cinch for Croyden and his accomplices to walk out when no one was around, and disable the necessary guards within a few seconds. Warned by my patent suspicion of him he had doubtless worked with unusual care, as well as forcing the climax that night rather than take chances on waiting.

That there was but one way to stop them was equally clear to me. The exhaust flames of the stolen ships were now red pin pricks of light at the rim of the field. Those D.H.s would make close to a hundred and twenty miles an hour. Chasing them with Jennies would be as futile as waving at the Twentieth Century Limited in an effort to stop it.

There was one ship on the field that could do it, maybe. Flinging orders to the guards who had run up from faraway posts, it took less than a minute for the alarm to be given, and a squat, wicked-looking Spad to be trundled on the line. Its gasoline tank was full and the two hundred and twenty horse power Hispano-Suiza motor caught on the first try.

I dared not take the time to warm it. No sooner had a white-faced soldier rushed up with three drums of ammunition for the machine guns than I was off, speeding into the darkness behind a cold motor for my long trip across the desert of mesquite which lay between Donovan and the Rio Grande.

I could barely keep track of the D. H.s by their exhaust flames, at first. For two minutes every second was an eternity as I waited and wondered whether that cold motor would start missing. It stood up though, and with my eyes flitting from my quarry, two miles ahead, to air pressure, oil pressure, temperature, and the rest of the gauges on the cluttered dash board in front of me I sent the sturdy little comet of the air on its way due south.

Soon I was over the billowing silver-green chaparral which rolled away to the skyline. A forced landing meant—well, no picnic. And I was flying wide open, hurtling across the 'squite as though shot from a gun. Goggleless and without a helmet I crouched below the windshield, and did more hoping to the square mile than I've ever done before or since. The scene below was of truly breath-taking beauty, but to me the earth was like a hungry monster reaching upward to engulf the frail little man-made machine which was daring it.

Fifty miles southward in a little less than half an hour, and now the D.H.s were thundering along only a few hundred yards ahead of me. They were at about twenty-five hundred feet, and I started to climb to get above them. I did not believe they were armed—the guns on them had been imitation machine guns, equipped with a camera inside which took a picture when the trigger was pressed. In practice combats cadets fired, and after it was over the pictures showed how many hits they would have scored. Perhaps Croyden and his men had been able to change guns, but I did not believe so. If they had, it would be the fast-manœuvring little Spad against four slower ships—a wasp fighting buzzards.

I WAS up to two thousand feet, climbing so steeply that I was gaining no longer, when one of the D.H.s banked abruptly. In a second it was flashing toward me, five hundred feet higher than I.

"They've got guns!" I told myself savagely.

Somehow I had the feeling that Croyden was the man behind the stick of that huge D. H. He'd be the one to come back and try to knock down the pursuer. But he would not come back without guns, unless he was unaware of the fact that I had them. But if I didn't, chasing them would be of no avail.

I sent the Spad into a steep bank, and watched warily. Now the D. H. was diving at me, at right angles. I twisted and turned to keep him from having a fair target. I did not want to shoot unless I had to, and was sure they had guns. I simply could not believe that any of those bombers were equipped with C. C. gears and guns.

They were not. As the ship flashed past my tail I saw that the cowling over the motor was bare. And that slim figure in the front cockpit, his boldly jutting profile outlined in the exhaust flame—it could be no one but Croyden.

Why was he diving at me, without machine guns? Feeling more secure, now, I circled a moment, watching him curiously. I'd go on in a minute, shoot a few bursts, round up my men or shoot them down, and convoy them back to Donovan. There Croyden was coming at me again.

I flew straight ahead, watching that great shadowy bulk come down at me at an easy two hundred miles an hour. I could fairly feel the ship quiver myself, hear the whine of the wires and the screaming roar of the overworked engine.

A hundred yards, a hundred feet, straight as a string he was coming at me. There was just the tenth part of a young gnat's whisker between me and the pearly gates that instant. Just in time my stunned brain comprehended the fact that the sardonic madman at the stick was going to *run into me.* Just in time I twisted the Spad down and to the right, and the undercarriage of that great De Haviland was within inches of my upturned left wing.

There started the most unique battle ever fought in the air, I believe. For nearly a minute my Spad was like some living thing, twisting, turning, banking, diving as I strove to keep out of the way of that aerial missile of death which was constantly on top of me. I could have shot him down—but a man who could go to his death to protect those planes on ahead was a man I could not kill if I could avoid it.

Never have I seen a big ship handled as Rex Croyden handled his. He turned it on a dime. Right side up, upside down, diving like a dropped stone or zooming like some flashing prehistoric bird—it made the Spad seem cumbersome and awkward. High above the moonlit mesquite, in a world of our own which like a delirious nightmare, he strove to send us both to our deaths.

The D. H.s ahead were almost out of sight, and in my dazed state of mind I let them get ahead so far that it was almost fatal. Finally I knew that I must shoot that greathearted flyer down. Crook, thief, whatever he might be, he was a man—

To this day I thank whatever gods there be that my hand was not the hand that struck him down that night. The De Haviland, unfit through its frail construction for such terrific manœuvring as he was putting it through, saved me that.

I saw it come snapping out of a nose dive, and start to zoom at me. I think the elevators simply snapped off. At the instant my hand was closing around the gun control on the stick to send a shower of lead through my propeller at him, the D. H.'s nose dropped, and it went rushing toward the earth with ever-increasing speed.

It never leveled off. I circled and watched, sitting as though paralyzed in my seat, as the thousand pound Liberty pulled the ship toward the earth like a falling meteor. I could almost see Croyden sitting there, knowing that he was on his last ride, and probably thumbing his nose at death. I flinched when it hit. A tremendous ball of fire lit up the earth, and I threw a farewell salute to the corpse of Rex Croyden.

My heart was heavy, for some reason, as I sent the Spad whistling on its way to the border, leaving the funeral pyre of my former cadet behind.

I caught up with the other D. H.s in less than half an hour, and got ahead of them and above them. Then, right before their eyes I came hurtling down, sending a rain of bullets from my guns into the ground. That was to illustrate how easily I could pick them off, one by one. When I shot past the lead ship I motioned northward, and then patted my guns.

Two red spots of fire gleamed from the cockpits as they tried to pick me off with a pistol. They had no chance, of course, at the speed at which I was going, and they turned reluctantly, and started flying north.

I stayed behind them, like an aerial herdsman, and I delivered them back to a wildly excited Donovan Field. There was no opportunity for them to escape—I think they knew that I'd have shot them on the ground if they had tried the hopeless task. I watched over them from the air until I saw the ships on the line and they themselves in the hands of the soldiers who were waiting.

THEY were held on the line until I had landed, and got out of my Spad. The colonel himself was with them. Navarro, his black eyes gleaming, flung me a question.

"You shot Lieutenant Croyden down?"

"I didn't need to. He cracked his own ship to pieces."

An almost prayerful Spanish phrase escaped his lips, and he wilted.

"Bring them to my office," commanded the colonel briskly, and the guards hustled the silent three to headquarters. All of them looked like Mexicans. I walked close to Navarro.

"Was Croyden a Mexican?" I asked him.

"Mexican mother, German father," mumbled the crushed Navarro.

The others plodded along stolidly, seemingly unmindful of the crowd which was following on curiously.

In headquarters the colonel, at the head of most of the field executives, said crisply;

"You'd better talk, to save yourselves. Evans, apparently your ideas concerning Croyden were entirely correct. Now, you fellows, why were you stealing sixty-five thousand dollars' worth of ships from the American Army?"

Navarro's eyes were wet. All the hot sentimentalism of the Mexican could be discerned plainly then.

"For the revolution," he said simply.

"What revolution?"

"To take over Mexico!" Navarro shot back hotly. "For a year we plan. We need the airplanes, we have no money for them. We take over the government with our army and our new, big planes. Then we go with Germany, ourselves—Mexico and Germany together!"

Every man in the room seemed to expel his breath in a long sigh.

"If we did not succeed, we use the ships to bother you ourselves. We do much damage to your flying fields, from our base in Mexico," Navarro went on in a rush of words, and there was the almost fanatic glow of a patriot in his eyes.

"And without him our chance is gone. Without us—it is also important, our capture. We were the flyers. It is the last blow," he finished hopelessly.

"May I ask a question?" I inquired of the colonel and when he nodded I asked Navarro:

"Did you plan all along to steal the ships tonight?"

"We did not know just when—any good night," he replied. "Mr. Croyden, he think you suspect him, so we do it tonight."

I nodded.

"I thought so. I thought I was smart when I tried him out on that stuff, Colonel, but he was smarter."

"Oh, I don't know," the colonel assured me genially. "You came out all right, it seems to me."

The colonel started questioning him calmly, and little by little the facts came out. Croyden had divided his time for years between America and Mexico, and since the beginning of the war he had been a partisan of Germany's. He had gone overseas and become a flyer in the German army, returning to Mexico as a secret agent of the German government, evidently to help foment sympathy for Germany and to secure cooperation from the Mexican government. Probably because he could secure no official sympathy, he had allied himself to one of the groups of hotheads who are always getting ready to revolutionize down there.

Joining the American Army Air Service seemed an absurdly easy way to steal a fleet of ships which would make the revolution a success. They would have no opposition to speak of. At first they had considered stealing them without joining the army, but had decided the risk was too great. So, through the testimony of secret sympathizers in this country, all had been enabled to appear eligible for the service.

If this coup had succeeded, they intended to try to get four ships more at a later date. Croyden had taught Navarro and the others to fly on one ship obtained from Germany. Others could have been gotten, probably, but stealing them from America seemed simpler and better. Germany needed her planes badly with America in the war.

What made me shiver was the thought of what those planes, turned against us, could have done to several Texas flying fields. Secure in our fancied immunity to all disaster, they could have rained bombs and bullets on us, destroyed millions of dollars' worth of ships and thousands of valuable trained flyers, before we knew what was up.

I left while the colonel and his aide and several federal agents from San Antonio were trying to get all the dope about that prospective revolution down there, and what Germany had to do with it. It was confidential, of course, and Navarro suddenly got close-mouthed before I left. However, I guess they wormed out enough stuff, because nothing important happened down below the border to crab us after that. The three Spigs spent the rest of the war, as far as I know, in jail, and there they may be still.

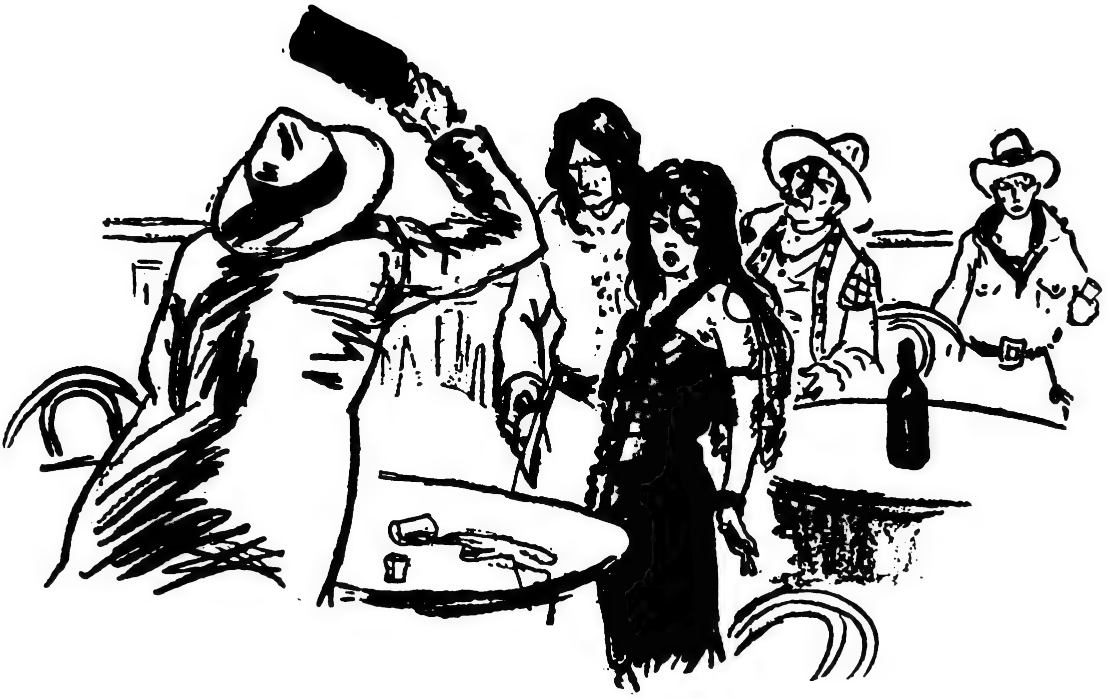
Well, that's about every bit of it, I guess. All's fair in love or war, they say and I know just a little bit about war. Enemy though he was, I mentally raise my plumed chapeau every time I think of that gloriously crazed flyer who'd saved my life and then tried to take it back again.

I say gloriously crazy, I'm just a dumb ex-cowboy whose brains are just sufficient to comprehend the fact that everybody on earth is a little bit crazy, some more so than others. If there ever should be a man who was absolutely normal he'd be considered the craziest of the human race. Especially in war time.

Which brings on too damn much talk, if you get what I mean.

Air Stories

What with all America taking to the air, air stories are exceedingly popular just now. We'll have another in next month's issue—"Three Miles Up" by Raoul F. Whitfield. Like Burtis, Whitfield, too, has had actual flying experience and lots of it.



THE ruthless years have nearly eliminated the generation which built the Union Pacific Railroad. Few remain of the stalwart army that saw the "roaring" towns spring up just ahead of the track-layers. The unrest born of the Civil War persisted after Appomattox; and thousands of young men believed it impossible to return to the humdrum of farm and town life. This widespread craving for change and fierce excitement was satisfied in many by the titanic task of binding a continent with iron. It was an era of astounding accomplishments and personal tragedies.

Nor did all those seeking thrills flock in from the East. There were those who had spent the greater part of their lives along the Continental Divide, in the Oregon country, in California, and Nevada. There were those along the eastern border of the Rocky Mountains who had taken no part in the Civil War. To such the Sand Creek fight was of vastly more importance than the three days at Gettysburg. The economic problems of the wounded nation were of less import to these than the passing of the old days, when one trapper could take half a thousand beaver, in one season, along the Green and its tributaries.

Attracted by the building of the railroad, men in buckskin traveled down from the mountains to see what it was all about, and were quickly caught up in the swirl of the successive termini. There they mingled with plainsmen in buckskin, who respected the mountains, but who always would insist that old Fort Laramie was the true shrine of those stressing the greatness of the West.

Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Montana, with laps filled with gold, caused a rare skirmishing back and forth over the Western trails. Nearly a quarter of a million of people were dependent on bull and mule teams for their supplies, and freighting across the Central plains and mountains added another colorful phase to a life now vanished. With the Civil War ended the entire West discovered the railroad was actually coming. Those who from curiosity flocked to the scene of the mammoth enterprise soon learned that the pay-car was a most powerful magnet. It drew along with it a small army of parasites. The many thousands of dollars regularly disbursed to the workers supplied a rich harvest for gambler and dance-hall girl, liquor seller and thief. Desperadoes accompanied the builders, to kill and be killed. Sandbanks became bustling towns.

Press and people of the East and the Pacific Coast were interested in the race between the Central Pacific, hurrying to Utah with Chinese coolies as laborers, and the Union Pacific, pushing forward under the endeavors of Irish immigrants. The Indian was an obstacle to be removed if he got in the way. The current state of mind perhaps was reflected by the press marveling that each day trains should be "roaring over plains from which the hostile Indian, deer and antelope have not yet been driven." Without reading the newspapers the Indian was deciding he was classified as a trespasser in his own ancient home.

The red state of mind was not stressed by the press, however. Readers were told that in the nine hundred odd miles from Omaha to Crow

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Beginning

The
Roaring Towns

A Story of the Dance Halls, the Saloons, the Bad Men of the Old West

By

HUGH PENDEXTER

Historical Background of the Story

Creek, then a part of Dakota territory, the uniform grade was ten feet to the mile and seldom sunk to a level: that in all this stretch there were two short stages of down grade, from the Omaha level to the Platte Valley, and from the divide down to Crow Creek. Graphic descriptions were printed of the builders toiling up the Platte and fighting against time in an effort to leave the flora of the Missouri basin behind before winter interrupted the work.

This strenuous endeavor to reach an altitude where only the larkspur retains its hues and where even the wild sun-flower and yellow saffron are dust colored and stunted, and the milkweed and resinweed are sickly, drove the aborigines to new councils and brought about much smoking of war-tobacco between chiefs of different tribes.

The progress of the eastern division was daily watched by the Indians, mounted and usually aloof. These spies had marvelous stories to take to their villages. They tried to describe the huge plows, drawn by eight oxen, and looking like toys in the vastness of the plains. The distance between the posts, set five miles apart, scarcely indicated an appreciable advance; yet each messenger carried home the same report. The Iron Horse was nearer. The men riding on the cow-catcher of the first engine to go over each newly laid section might be pygmies; yet they were taking great liberties with nature and were surely advancing.

It all was bad medicine to the Indian. He was unable to comprehend even a tithe of the vast preparations for supplying and handling the endless stream of material. The spies at first hoped there would be a surcease, when the trains must go back whence they came for more iron. But there was no cessation of the work. A train unloaded and puffed back for more. Some forty-two horse trucks were ever hauling their loads to the front and turning back at a gallop for more. Such ceaseless efforts to accomplish much in each day could signify only one fact. The white men had gone crazy. The watchers saw an iron run off the truck on the side-roller to be instantly seized by three men and run out the required distance. Already the iron blocks, or "chairs" had been set under the last rails laid. By one movement of the two men at the rear end the new rail was forced into the block. The watchers were near enough to hear the boss of the crew yell "Down!" Twice a minute on the two sides of the track was shouted "Down"! It was a word that was carried back to the village and was interpreted as meaning, "finished."

For many thousands of young men, loosed from two armies by Lee's surrender, the West was the land of promise. Here was the Great Adventure, even though it often walked hand in hand with death. Paths to high honor in commonwealths as yet unorganized beckoned the ambitious and stout of heart. Wild license called to those who were weary of restraint. Fortunes in trade, in land speculation, and in gold mining were awaiting those who endured. In army-posts along the Bozeman road, in tumultuous railroad towns, in isolated mining communities, the hodge-podge of the strong and the morally weak found what they sought; places of trust and the ignominy of the noose.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IRON HORSE GOES FORTH

FEVERNAGER, veteran plainsman, and young Baltimore, his partner, commenced selling fresh and smoked meats to the boss of the boarding cars, when the head of the railroad reached Pine Bluff, thirty-five miles east of Crow Creek. Their several trips to the road had been profitable and they were casting about for a likely man to take into partnership as their business increased. Baltimore was not quick to make acquaintances and it was Fevernager who transacted business. Once the meat was delivered and the money received the two led their pack mules some distance to a grassy ridge where they halted to watch the animated scene.

There had been a time when Fevernager had possessed a family name, and there had been friends who knew something of his history. Few were alive on this September day, 1867, who could tell the old man's name and antecedents. Thirty years back he had received his odd cognomen and it had stuck. Although gregarious when visiting military posts and settlements, his eyes were melancholy as he watched the track-layers fighting against time. The coming of the iron road was as unwelcome to him as it was to the Indians.

Although watching the procession of carts hauling the rails to the construction crews he was seeing other pictures. There were the outfits making for the mountains for beaver. There was the "fight of the bullies" and the proud privilege of wearing the red belt. Then he was back in Independence, the jumping off place for the Santa Fé trade. He was beholding the sudden importance of Westport, Kansas City, Atchison, Leavenworth and Omaha, all built by trade. This gradual advance of the border was pleasant enough to contemplate, with the exception of Omaha and the settlement of eastern Nebraska.

Once the movers jumped the Big Muddy and planted homes he had sensed danger to the West he had known and loved. Then came the advance of the Union Pacific and marvelous changes. Of a sudden he realized the old West could scarcely last out his day, and his natural vivacious, belligerent spirit was tinged with moodiness. The phenomenon of towns springing up on sandbanks and prairie in the space of a few days had amazed him, and the attending wild life had furnished him with new thrills. But once back in his camp and sober, he grieved over the inevitable. Speaking his thoughts aloud he muttered:

"Never'll last out my few years. Ain't right. Ain't just. Nothing fair about it. Country's being civilized and going plump to hell."

Young Baltimore, tanned to the color of an Indian and dressed in white buckskin, also had been following a line of thought as his blue eyes watched the workmen. He aroused his companion by murmuring, "There's that man again who comes from the East and talks like a chief. I don't know if I'd like him, or hate him."

"That comes of living with Injuns so long. Can't let a man alone in your thoughts, like you can a tree, or a mountain. Just have to hate or like. That feller's Allan Gorl. Boarding car boss told me about him. He's kept along with the road from Omaha. Big Eastern trader, Rhode Island man. Makes a heap of money. Funny how Eastern pilgrims can come out here and build railroads and raise Cain so bodaciously and yet not know nothing about the country."

The two watched the fine, upstanding figure of Gorl. His every step bespoke great confidence in self. He was walking to the head of the line with a division engineer and made florid gestures with his hands as he talked. If something of an enigma to the plainsman and Baltimore he was not an unusual type in the itinerant population brought by the railroad, and previously created by various gold rushes. At the age of fifty he had wakened to the fear his whole life was to be lived in a rut. He always had worked hard to make money. For twenty-five years he had toiled and taken profits. When the Civil War closed repressed desires cropped to the surface. He discovered he was weary of prosperity and respectability. He came West to find surcease from dull decency, to release a stifled impulse to live carelessly. His friends believed he was catering to an insatiable appetite for bigger profits. They predicted he would become a national figure in finance. And surely there were opportunities enough, and his ind was sufficiently commercialized to ke the utmost advantage.

He did big things in a big way. He was steemed and liked by the executives of he road and was thought highly of by ak Ames. He lost nothing by these riendships, and his first ten thousand dollars worth of goods bought in Omaha rought him profits which would have mazed his business associates back East. But already he had developed traits his ld acquaintances would not have recognized. They had known him as a successful, tight-lipped seeker of gains. His new nvironment had expanded him. He talked oud without giving offense. His breezy peech and boasts would have been condemned as overweening conceit in a man f lesser physique, perhaps. In him it was oth a pleasing rhetorical gesture and a romise to accomplish.

None of his new friends west of the Big Muddy suspected his fat profits were f secondary importance in his mind. They ssumed he came West to find opportunities for larger commercial successes, and hat his exuberance of animal spirits was transient reflection of a new and colorful nvironment. There was not one of his ew friends who suspected that dormant endencies were behind his flamboyant and ood-natured personality.

Railroad men in speaking of him told ach other, "The West is waking him up."

This was true in a measure. Suppressed esires were "waking up." With Omaha ehind him he felt he was as thoroughly emoved from moral responsibilities as if uddenly awaking on another planet. Many others in that army of virile workers nd cast off restraint as Gorl was fast earning to do.

Fevernager approved as he heard the oud and hearty laughter of the big man. Just like a big boy," mused the plainsman. "But he ain't lost his keenness. Boss f boarding car was telling me he made big trade at North Platte. Knew ahead was to be a station. His tent store was he first to open for trade on that sand ank. In no time he was selling to three r four thousand people; but he closed the ade before the people moved on. Them hat hung on for three months found themselves alone with a hotel, a couple of aloons and a section house."

"He drinks hard. Gambles heavy. His medicine will grow weak," muttered young Baltimore.

"A bit of a hellion, mebbe. But most everyone out here in these new towns is the same. He'll make more money in a year than they make in a lifetime back East."

"He likes women," continued Baltimore. "Only an Indian can keep several squaws in a tipi and not go *heyoka*.*"

Fevernager impatiently replied, "Your life with the Injuns makes you see things different."

"It would have been better if I'd been killed when they killed my folks, when they killed, or carried away my sister," quietly announced Baltimore. "I must have been three or four years old when they caught me. I've lived with white folks for five years. By the winter counts and from what Black Dog once told me I was ten years with different bands. Of course the red got into my mind in spots. And I can't wash it out. But I always remember the little girl they say was my sister. Not her face, but how she bent over me. She had long black hair and there was a streak of light hair through it, as if she'd brushed it with a piece of white clay. That and the word 'Baltimore' are all I remember."

"Hard luck, younker. But you're one of many. Back in '52, beginning sixty miles east of Laramie, I counted six fresh graves to the mile right up to the fort. Old Oregon road's lined with 'em."

"Death is not bad. If I could only know she was not taken prisoner."

"Baltimore, I've told you time'n time again that all your folks was wiped out."

BEFORE the other could reply an Indian galloped up to them and called out in the Teton dialect, "They say Crazy Horse will make a feast if the young man comes back to his people."

Baltimore stared moodily and replied. "He is with his people now. Crazy Horse is a great chief. Makhpia-sha (Red Cloud) is a mighty chief. The young man will not go back to the tipis of the Oglala . . . There was a white girl. Very small, with medicine hair."

The Oglala man stared toward the west for nearly a minute. Then he slowly replied, "She is a ghost in the Land of many Tipis."

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*Teton Dakota: a foolish or demented person.

"Can Black Dog show where she was buried?"

"She was found by white men and buried. Black Dog does not know the place. Look for a cloud that crossed the sky many winters ago. Do not look for the white girl. Only the boy was taken to the Oglala village. He was a small boy. He was very brave. He struck a chief with his small hand. A great chief says his tipi is empty while he is away."

"Tell the chief I do not know what he means. Tell him I have blue eyes and am a white man. They say Black Dog is *hcyoka*. He rides near white men with white scalps tied to the chin-straps of his pony."

Black Dog darted a malignant glance at the army of workers and haughtily answered, "Black Dog is *wakan witshasha*. His medicine is strong. He will never die. A ghost told him in a dream he will live till he is killed by an Oglala man who is not an Oglala man. How can he be killed by something that is not? He can wear his medicine scalp-shirt among the white men and not be hurt."

Fevernager frowned, deeply puzzled. His faith in dreams was great. Baltimore also was impressed and slowly agreed, "It is a strong dream. Black Dog's medicine is strong. Yet he is a foolish man to ride near white men with scalps flapping from the chin-straps of his pony. A strong medicine sometimes becomes sick and grows weak."

"The medicine shall have a feast. It will not grow weak." Then he patted the fringed case holding his rifle and added, "If white men go north of the Platte this will be carried bare. Let the young man come back to his red fathers. Let the old man come with him. They will find only friends." With that he wheeled his pony and scurried rapidly away.

The plainsman and his companion had satisfied their curiosity and started back to their camp to shoot and cure more meat. The track-layers kept up their race against time, each day clipping off more of the Indians' ancient domain.

Although but two months old, Cheyenne was assured of rapid growth and importance. City lots selling for one hundred and fifty dollars in the middle of July jumped to a thousand dollars within t
weeks, and were easily selling for twen
five hundred dollars in September. T
bare and desolate narrow bottom of Cr
Creek had J. R. Whitehead's two-st
frame house for its first substantial str
ture. Scarcely had the land agent of
Union Pacific opened his office to sell l
before it was widely known the new to
was to be the winter terminus and
population was supplied by a rush
speculators and merchants from Julesbu
and other Colorado towns. Close on th
heels came more speculators and trad
from the railway head down the Plat
Back on the Missouri men were hurryi
westward to take their profits.

This "roaring" promised to be perm
nent. Gamblers, liquor dealers and d
peradoes came in droves. This vicio
element and the first great field of wago
gave it the name of "Hell on Wheel
But while this phase of the floating pop
lation was much stressed there was
time when the honest and worthwh
people did not greatly outnumber the rec
less and evil, and the name of "The Ma
City" was to quickly supplant the fi
rough and suggestive appellation.

Fort D. A. Russell was established thr
miles west of the town. Midway betwe
the two was Camp Carlin, the quart
master's depot. Carlin alone was a d
cided impetus to growth of any settleme
as it was to furnish supplies to a do
army posts, even to a distance of f
hundred miles. Already its civilian lab
ers and teamsters were furnishing m
trade. Night and day it was adding
its warehouses and corrals, as well as
its shops for wheelwrights, carpente
blacksmiths, harness-makers, painters, a
saddle-makers. These men and the soldie
from the fort brought a large amount
gold and greenbacks to Cheyenne.

Fevernager and Baltimore were qui
to see this was to be their market in th
future. The two hunters were loading
wagon with empty whisky barrels at
tent saloon near the Headquarters Sal
when the big figure of Allan Gorl ploug
a path through the crowded street. T
plainsman saw him first and comme
"If he'd been on the ground early h
made a heap."

Baltimore watched Gorl's heavy a
slightly rounded shoulders disapp

around a corner, and then informed, "I heard a man from the South, Lee Darby, say Gorl went to Julesburg when he should have come here." Then, bitterly, "But he'll make much money. His folks weren't killed by Indians. He's had a chance."

"Ain't fair, ain't right. Nothing just about it the way some folks have all the chance. But I wouldn't spend most of my life in the East for all the money 'tween here'n hell . . . Lee Darby's a good feller. If he'd throw in with us we could use him prime. What to say to asking? Way things look we'll have more'n we can handle."

Baltimore nodded his head and said, "I'll finish here. He's making 'dobe brick for Jim Talbot."

FEVERNAGER soon found Darby, a Louisiana man, young, lean, and war-weary. The plainsman abruptly announced, "Want you to throw in with young Baltimore'n me. Taking some barrels for pickling back to camp. We're going into smoking meat in a bigger way. Work's hard, but you'll eat like a Brule buck and sleep like a bear in winter. Your third'll be more'n you'll ever make at that puttering game." And he nodded contemptuously at the bricks laid out to dry in the sun.

Darby straightened and glanced down at the bespattered and sadly worn cavalry boots, and replied, "Hold the offer open for a bit. Think I'll throw in with you. But I can't leave Talbot in the lurch. These brick are fetching sixty-five dollars a thousand, but once the road comes in nothing but burnt brick will sell. Where's your camp?"

"Down at the head of the Little Crow, some ten miles southeast of here. We'll try'n see you 'fore hauling out. Just saw that man Gorl, who come along with the railroad. Queer how you'll notice some men."

Darby inclined his head in agreement and again stared down at his broken boots. The boots, worn clothing and his Colt revolver were about all the war had left him. He felt bitter as he contrasted his lot with Gorl's secured place in life, yet he wanted to be just. "He can go far out here if he keeps his head. He must have some qualities, or folks wouldn't take to him at sight."

"Talks too much. Talks too loud. Chucking his chances away. His medicine 'll git tired and quit him if he don't perk up."

"Playing a bit too hard and unwisely, perhaps," said Darby. "But he has the money and the head—and I'm making sun-dried bricks after four years of fighting. Well, let's be honest. I couldn't do what he's done even if I had his money. If you're round town to-night I'll find you. Keep Baltimore close to you. Someone may take him for an Indian if they don't see the color of his eyes. Some rough customers here. Heard some men talking about a new bad man in town."

"Town's filled with the bodacious critters. All jealous of one t'other. And every onery one hankers to git bad enough to outshoot Wild Bill Hickok. If he'd quit Kansas and come here he'd give quite a parcel their needings. We'll be drifting round town for a spell after dark."

That Gorl should impress himself on Darby's notice was significant. Darby, practically penniless, had come to the railway line in search of opportunities. Unlike the New England man he had no desire for excitement. War had burned out all such notions. As he returned to his work he brooded somewhat over the disparities in life. Gorl had escaped the grind of war and had had all the pleasantries. The Southerner found it difficult not to feel some bitterness toward the Rhode Island man.

"Muddy boots and a broken back," he muttered. Then angrily, "Well, damn it, man! He isn't to blame if you make bricks. If you want something better out of life and haven't guts enough to get it, why kick?"

After quitting work he made for the town and one of the first groups of men he met was surrounding the Rhode Island man and listening to his loud-voiced optimism. Gorl was reminding his audience that Cheyenne was to be one of the key-towns of the U. P. line, the most important town between Omaha and Salt Lake. There were the repair-shops and engine houses and executive offices to be established, and these alone, he insisted, would make for permanent prosperity. Then he urged his hearers to lose no time in making their fortunes.

In the midst of his earnest harangue he

suddenly broke off and heaved up his big shoulders to stare over the heads of the group. "The little Spaniard!" he cried. "Called her Dollie at Julesburg. Young devil's down here!" And his big arms were flung out like a swimmer's and he had cleared a path and was hurrying to overtake a tall, slim girl with a Spanish mantilla covering her shapely head.

One of his auditors remarked, "No wonder they call him 'Lucky' Gorl. No wonder he can spend money like water. All he has to do is to turn his hand over to get back all he's spent."

Another enviously informed, "In one night at Julesburg he blew in more'n I can make in fifteen years. He let that woman from Bitter Creek he's now chasing lose ten thousand at faro at one sitting. And he laughed as if it tickled him. Of course she got a fat rake-off for getting him to that particular game. Now she's trailed him down here and he thinks he's found her by chance. She'll play more of his roll into a game to-night and make more'n an honest man can make in six months."

"Women you buy always come mighty dear," philosophically commented a third.

Darby walked on in the direction Gorl had taken and found Fevernager in the third eating place he entered. The plainsman said his partner was hunting for a gun store and would not join them at supper. After eating the two men walked through busy Eddy street, the main thoroughfare, looking for Baltimore, but did not find him.

Since July many of the tents and wagons had been replaced by houses of logs, of cross-ties stood on end and roofed with canvas, of tents, of boards put together in sections, of adobe brick, and the building up of the place was feverishly being pushed day and night. Some of the portable buildings were old acquaintances with men who had traveled along with the railroad. There were bullets holes acquired down the Platte; and there were dark stains on some floors that held gruesome stories.

DESPITE the street gossip insistence that the Spanish girl was a lure to send Gorl's money across a gaming-table, her talk with him as they ate supper in the back room of a dance-hall was quite to the contrary. She was beautiful, when the light was kindly; a pitiable qualification for one scarcely in the twenties. There was much animation in her dark eyes as in excellent, although halting English, she insisted, "You mus' buy and sell. Buy and sell."

"Don't bother your pretty head about my buying and selling. I've been doing that for nearly thirty years— Hi! boy! What's this damned stuff you sold me for champagne? Bring me some honest whisky, if there's any in this place— Forget business, Dollie. I'll do the remembering. If it'll ease your mind I'll tell you I'm going to take a big contract for hauling in timber from the hills twenty miles away. This Camp Carlin will soon need a thousand mules. I'll handle that. Then there are hay and wood contracts for Laramie and other posts. I'll go after them. Now are you satisfied, Miss Prudence Economy?"

"You're a very wonderful man!" she murmured.

"I can hold my own with any of them out here. Haven't seen a business man yet that I can't think circles around on any business deal. But at times I get tired of making money. I want to spend money."

"I lose so much for you at Julesburg!" she sighed.

"Bah! That wasn't my money. It's the crowd's money. It belonged to the West. It's still here. It isn't lost. I'll get it back double. Why, there are so many chances to make money one has to pick and choose. In the East it's different. Out here it's hard to guess wrong. But that's enough of money. I'm Lucky Gorl. We'll go and test my luck."

"But no one is lucky at the tables," she protested. "Once, sometimes. For a little while in one night, perhaps. But no luck if one doesn't stop after winning and keep away."

"Talk for the milk-fed. Come along."

BEFORE reaching the nearest faro bank he had drunk himself into an ugly mood, which would have been recklessness in another. The Spanish girl sat beside him and repeatedly endeavored to get him away. If anything her insistence made him more reckless. He played the limit. When he was near the end of his ready cash he called for the proprietor and asked if he would accept his check on the J. A. Ware & Company bank at Julesburg.

"Lucky Gorl's simple I. O. U. is good enough for me," heartily assured the proprietor.

"I never borrow," shortly replied Gorl as he wrote a check for five thousand dollars.

The girl rested a hand on his arm and whispered, "Remember you're not ver' lucky tonight, señor."

"Lucky enough to find you, Dollie. Now hush while I break this bank."

He played for an hour with varying success at first, and then lost repeatedly. Finally he leaned back and laughed uproarously and announced, "Well, that's finished. I'll tack it on to the first contract I sign. Five thousand gone to the devil. Let's get out of here and find a place to eat."

She led the way as if better acquainted with the mushroom growth of the town and selected a low frame dining room near the New Idea Saloon. No games of chance were running there. She led Gorl to a table next to that occupied by Fevernager and Darby. Gorl was drunk but the business instinct was not submerged. As his gaze happened to rest on Darby's mud-spattered and broken cavalry boots, he muttered:

"Fortune in boots to be made here. Remind me of that when I'm sober, Dollie."

At the same moment Darby was whispering to his companion, "Has all the chances to make an everlasting fortune and he's throwing himself to the devil."

"Just as sure as you was licked out of your boots back in the States," agreed the plainsman. "But she's a mighty fetching looking——"

"I didn't mean that. She's very young and very unfortunate."

Gorl had said something that caused the girl to querulously complain, "But so much money to toss away! If you mus' toss so much, toss it to me."

"You're never satisfied," grumbled Gorl, now entering into a vicious mood. He emptied his glass and refilled it. His companion rested a hand on his arm and warned:

"You're ver' drunk."

"On the road to it, maybe. But you've fared well out of my drunks. Say, look there! Same fellow again. Seems to be following us around. Always watching you."

Fevernager and Darby shifted their gaze and beheld young Baltimore leaning against the short bar and drinking a glass of beer, his blue eyes steadily staring at the Spanish girl. Gorl made a pretense of eating and grumbled under his breath. The girl in a low voice talked to him as if trying to quiet him. Baltimore remained with his back to the bar, sipping his beer and staring.

The plainsman murmured, "You know his story. Folks killed by some Oglala Sioux in South Pass during the Forty-nine rush. His sister was a bit older'n him. There ain't any doubt but what she was killed the same time. But he can't git rid of the idee she's still alive—look at the young Spaniard's hair."

Darby glanced at the next table. The girl's hair was black except for one tress of lighter shade running along the top of her head. "Well, what about it?" he asked.

"See the medicine streak in her hair? The younker's kid sister had the same marking in her dark hair. I've talked'n talked to him that she passed out with his ma 'n pap, but he keeps looking for her."

"I've talked with him two or three times. He never let on anything about a sister. He has the bluest eyes I ever saw." And he lifted his head to admire the slim, erect figure, quite dandified in appearance in new white buckskin and beaded moccasins. He wore no hat and his black hair fell over his shoulders. His dark face accentuated the blue of his eyes. Until one saw his eyes it would have been natural to believe him an Indian. That he had found a gun-store was evidenced by the new Colt forty-four, sagging his belt with its weight of two pounds and eleven ounces.

He had been content to study the girl. But as she met his gaze, and, unseen by Gorl, smiled slightly his eyes dilated. He straightened and slowly advanced toward her table. Gorl saw him coming and scowled.

Without giving any heed to the man Baltimore halted beside the girl and stared down at the mass of black hair, set off by the big comb and threaded by the light yellow strand. She pretended not to notice him as she furtively watched Gorl's heavy face, now flushed with drink and resentment. Baltimore drew a handful of greenbacks from his hunting shirt and with the directness learned during his years in a red village placed the money on the table before her and slowly said, "For you."

Gorl threw up his big head and glared into the somber face of the intruder; and he roared, "What'n hell you mean? Think you can buy this little woman?"

Scarcely moving his bowed head Baltimore met the angry man's gaze and in a scarcely audible voice replied, "No. There is medicine in her hair. I give the money as feast for her medicine."

That she had learned of his half-belief she might be his lost sister became evident to the plainsman and Darby when she hurriedly explained to her companion, "He thinks I make him think of someone else." And her covetous hand slowly reached for the money.

Gorl roughly knocked her hand aside and told Baltimore, "By——! You look more like a Sioux buck than a white man, even if your eyes are blue."

His loud voice focused the attention of the entire room on the table. A man at the bar called out, "Uster live with Injuns. Some say he runs with 'em now and gits his money that way. White folks' money."

Baltimore gave no heed to the sinister suggestion. To Gorl he slowly explained: "I was caught by the Oglala Dakota when very young. I was brought up by them. I have good friends among them. I left them, never to return. I am a white man."

"And flush with money you never earned!" jeered Gorl, now resting his elbows on the table and cupping his square chin as he stared wrathfully up into the dark face.

His voice still dispassionate, Baltimore told him, "I earned all the money there is in the world by losing so many years out of my life, by losing my people. It's true the Plains Indians have money at times. Sometimes one of them may have quite a bit of it. Paper money means nothing to them, except they know white men like it. I trade for it with them. But they'd gladly give it to me if I would take it that way."

"Blood on it!" cried the voice at the bar.

"You'd take money the —— took from the bodies of white folks they've murdered!" thundered Gorl, jerking up his massive head.

"He's helped 'em make more'n one kill!" yelped the man at the bar.

Baltimore swung his gaze about to rake the bar and while seeking his traducer quietly continued telling Gorl, "It's true the Indians get quite a lot of money from those they kill and take prisoners. It's true they hold mighty few male prisoners. When they murdered my father and mother they got several thousand dollars. White traders were quick to take it from them."

"Well, you can't give any of your damned murderers' money to this young woman," warned Gorl.

"I earned it by selling meat to the railroad and to the eating houses in this town," Baltimore corrected.

"He's a damn Injun clear through!" cried the man at the bar.

BALTIMORE glanced down at the Spanish girl, and as if fascinated slowly extended his hand to touch her hair. He pulled his hand back even as Gorl made a gesture to strike. Then he stepped back and would have withdrawn had not Gorl discovered the girl had secreted the money. Infuriated to a homicidal pitch the Rhode Island man lurched to his feet and lifted a bottle of whisky to brain the intruder. The Spanish girl screamed, the voice at the bar shouted for Gorl to kill. The bottle was raised and Baltimore drew his revolver just as Darby jumped to his feet and caught the young man's wrist and with his free hand gave Gorl a push that caused him to drop heavily in his chair, breaking the bottle on the table. The Spanish girl continued her shrill screaming.

A man broke through the crowd, a forty-four Colt in his hand. He was the same who had been reviling the young man. As he came through the jam he shouted, "Clear the track! I'm going to plug that white Injun!"

Darby released Baltimore's wrist and jumped aside. Baltimore swung about and glared at the man advancing, pawing his way roughly. While Baltimore waited for a chance to shoot without hitting a bystander Fevernager gave a wild whoop and dived into the frightened group of men and came face to face with the would-be killer. The latter, now seeing Baltimore was free to defend himself ceased shoving men from his path. He made no resistance as the plainsman gripped his gun hand and pushed it down and backward and growled:

"Here! Here! Think you're driving headquarters wagon? You will be pernikety, when you think t'other man is helpless, eh?" And the gun-hand was forced to the middle of the man's back and held there. Advancing his be-whiskered face close to the craven countenance Fevernager continued, "So it's Jack Hays, huh? Only a dog, Baltimore. He can't bite. Hays, you've been letting your little finger ride your thumb. Rum's made you have a war-dream. While I don't go for to hurt a drunken man I'm going to carve you up most bodaciously if you don't keep that barker in your belt." And he suddenly released his grip and whipped out a butcher knife and stood with the point all but pricking the hairy throat.

"No white Injun's going to 'sult a white man and this woman from Bitter Creek," Hays began to bluster.

"I'll have your harslet out on the floor in the shake of a cow's tail if you make any more war-talk. You drop that gun! What I say goes for Shorty'n Keith over at the bar. Drop it! That's better."

He caught the weapon as Hays relinquished it and restored the long knife to his belt. Then he told Hays, "In the morning you can git your barker at the bar. Now clear out."

"Wait," said Baltimore, stalking forward and walking more like an Indian than a white man. He had thrust his revolver through his belt and his hands were empty. Gently thrusting the plainsman aside he faced Hays and told him, "My medicine sees the mark of a red noose around your neck. A ghost is whispering you will hang before the railroad goes beyond Cheyenne. Now he can go, *kola* (friend)."

Fevernager grinned broadly and stepped back and gave his attention to Keith and Shorty, brother desperadoes of Hays. Shorty was a very tall, loose-jointed individual despite his nickname. Hays was confused to find himself so ignominiously dismissed. Men were laughing at him. He swung about, eager to get outside and secure another weapon and assault by stealth. But Baltimore, suddenly deciding he was not done with the fellow, clapped a hand on his shoulder and spun him about face and said:

"I've thought of something else. You've made a bad talk to me. You've said bad things about me because of my paper money. They say you are not careful where and how you get your money. A ghost still whispers you surely will hang. But you don't like paper money of mine; so I'll give you some gold in nuggets."

He reached inside his shirt and slowly withdrew his hand. "See if you and your friends can find where I stole these. It'll be the first honest work you ever did. Did I get them from murdered whites, or from rich diggings? I know where there's a ton of it, waiting to be picked up." He drew back his hand and hurled several ounces of small nuggets into the desperado's face.

Hays yelped in pain and surprise, but as the nuggets fell to the floor everything else was forgotten. With wild yells men fought each other to secure and inspect the specimens. Cursing and striking and grabbing they piled up in a mad scramble. Hays was sent flying backward by a burly fist. Fevernager slipped around to stand by Darby as Baltimore took advantage of the confusion to leave the place.

Gorl stared stupidly at the struggling men at his feet. A gray-whiskered veteran from the old California camps emerged from the squirming mass, clutching a nugget. He held it under a hanging oil lamp and, after carefully examining it, cried:

"White or Injun, he knows where an everlasting fortune for all of us is to be had! Stop him! Fetch him back!"

The rush to the door was immediate and the jam was so dense that none gained the street for the fraction of a minute. Fevernager told Darby:

"I'm sneaking out the back way. Young fool must be rushed from town at once. Join us on the Little Crow."

Darby had but the one thought. He clamped a hand on the plainsman's shoulder and hoarsely whispered, "Where did he get that stuff?"

"Don't know. Must be up in the Sioux country. Never knew he was toting the stuff around. That man'll need help if he finds his blankets to-night."

He referred to Gorl and as Darby loosened his grip and turned to glance at the Easterner he was in time to behold the Spanish girl endeavoring to get her companion on his feet. Over indulgence had registered with deadening effect. Gorl appeared to be totally paralyzed in his legs.

"But you mus' go!" wailed the girl.

Darby stepped forward and told her, "You go, miss. I'll see he gets safely to bed."

"No—white Indian . . ." But the rest dwindled into drunken babbling. The girl quickly passed behind the bar and out of sight. The room was practically empty as the feverish hunt through the streets got under way. The news spread that a man was somewhere in town who knew where millions in gold nuggets were to be had for the taking.

After some difficulty Darby got Gorl on his feet and partially aroused him from his stupor. With greater difficulty he finally managed to get him to the Dodge House near the corner of O'Neil and 18th street.

THE first floor of the Dodge House, the "best hotel in Cheyenne," consisted of a small room that served as office and bar, and the dining-room. The second floor was one room with three rows of beds. When Gorl opened his eyes to the morning light and beheld a dark-complexioned stranger seated on a bed and drawing on muddy, dilapidated boots he peevishly demanded, "What's this? Just where am I?"

Darby cheerfully quoted, "You're in 'No myriad-roomed and many corridored-complexities.'"

Gorl stared about until his wits cleared. Then he mumbled, "Dodge House. How did I get here?"

"On my strong right arm and shoulder. I fetched you here. My name's Lee Darby. You're Lucky Gorl. Met you last night when you were hankering to kill young Baltimore in a tent eating-house. Baltimore is a hunter."

"I can't remember," murmured Gorl, screwing up his big features in a vain effort to follow a mental trail back through oblivion to the preceding evening. He began to recall what had happened earlier in the day and he angrily exclaimed, "Guess I ought to kill him. He's the one who's always making eyes at my girl. A damned Indian!"

"No more red than you are," sharply corrected Darby. "He's a decent young man with a very sad history. Almost everyone out here knows his story. Sioux butchered his parents and sister in South Pass. Took him prisoner and brought him up. His life with the Indians has had its influence over him. But he's all white."

"If he doesn't keep away from Dollie I'll kill him!"

"You'll kill no one except yourself. Rum will wind you up mighty soon. You were beastly drunk last night and entirely helpless. Still you were fool enough to attack young Baltimore. And you could scarcely manage to stand up. Helpless as a kitten."

"As bad as that, eh?" muttered Gorl. "Doesn't happen often. Still, I mean it. If he comes sneaking around that girl I'll get him."

"All you'll get is a grave in the forty-acre cemetery just started east of the town to hold the dead from Fort Russell, Carlin and Cheyenne. I've taken the bother to fetch you here and I've stayed till you've come to your senses. Don't take any fight to young Baltimore unless you crave a sudden death."

"Thanks for the bother you were put to. It was neighborly of you and more than I could expect from a stranger. As to Baltimore I'll wait till I'm fit. Allan Gorl sober is much different from Allan Gorl drunk."

"I should hope so. But the boy's interest in the Spanish girl is innocent," impatiently explained Darby. "She reminds him of his little sister, who surely was killed, but who, he half-believes, still lives. It's that light streak through her dark hair. He was too young to remember much about his folks or his sister, but he does remember the girl's hair."

"Good Lord! But Dollie can't be his sister!" whispered Gorl.

"Not a chance. His sister was murdered by the savages. She is all right. God forbid she should have lived to become a woman from Bitter Creek."

"You're damned frank in your talk! They're human beings. They're—"

"They are just what men like you have made them, and their fate is pitiable. They can't go back and patch up a new life as you and your kind can. Mighty few who have followed the railroad will ever see the Missouri again. They've been buried all along the way."

"Oh, quit your preaching." And with a groan Gorl sat up on the side of the bed and pressed his big hands against his aching head. After the dizziness had passed he agreed, "I must have been an awful fool. But I was drunk. Of course I didn't understand. If you see that young man before I do please tell him I am sorry."

"He's quit the town. Left it in an uproar. Threw a handful of gold nuggets at the crowd in the eating-tent. Town's gone gold-mad."

"Had gold, eh? Secret ought to be worth a lot. Well, it was mighty neighborly in you to bother with me, Mr. Darby. I'm appreciative. Seldom I get under the weather so I can't take care of myself. Just where did you come from?"

"From the war. Never went back home to Louisiana."

"I see. You knew you'd find life colorless back home. Came out here for excitement."

"Entirely wrong," Darby corrected. "I want no excitement; not if I live a million years. I've had enough. But the South is ruined, and only a Northern carpetbagger has a chance there. I'll be an old man before the South recovers. I'm too selfish to spend the rest of my life in building it up. I'm out here to make some money."

Gorl got to his feet and rubbed his head violently, and groaned, "Ought to be a drink around here, but I see none. We'll go down to the bar and burn a hair of the dog. Queer you want things quiet and I want them lively, and that the two of us should come out here. We're alike in both wanting money. I've made lots of it." His big arms were flourished in a florid gesture. "Thrown away lots of it. I can make lots more. Now that you've done me two good turns, getting me to bed and in explaining about the young man—"

"Oh, that's all right. Now you're O. K. I'll be getting back to the brick-yard. Making sun-dried bricks."

"Have a drink first. Sun-dried bricks, eh? Sounds like rather small potatoes."

"The pay is good. It's ready money. And I'm thinking of going into something else. Hunting. Selling meat to Cheyenne and the railroad workers."

"Still small potatoes," mused Gorl. "Trot along with me to the bar. My head's clearing. I'll furnish the capital and you do the hustling. We'll go into details after I've washed away this headache."

As Darby followed him to the stairs he curiously asked, "What sort of business do you have in mind?"

"Selling ready-made houses. Big money in it if handled on a large scale," snapped Gorl.

THE small bar was crowded and clamorous. There had been two homicides during the night, but the principal topic at the bar was the whereabouts of young Baltimore and the source of his nuggets. The bartender was quick to see Gorl's heavy, rounded shoulders. He passed a bottle and glasses over the heads of those filling the bar. Darby took a small drink, Gorl took a big one. Darby refused a second and Gorl without a word presented the bottle to the man nearest him. Fevernager eyed him quizzically and remarked, "I still can buy my own drink, but good liquor shouldn't never be wasted. That wouldn't be fair. Wouldn't be just. Nothing right about it."

"Drink hearty, neighbor," mumbled Gorl.

Darby clapped a hand on the buckskin shoulder, and, with a wink, greeted, "Fevernager, glad to see you. Want you to know Allan Gorl, Eastern trader, who's going to do big things out here."

With no recollection of having seen the plainsman before Gorl curtly said, "Glad to meet any friend of my new partner's. Now, Darby, for a bank."

He turned and commenced shouldering his way to the door. Fevernager clutched Darby's arm and whispered, "Ain't throwing in with us?"

"Not if this pans out. I'll talk with you later."

He kept at Gorl's heels as the latter ploughed into the continuous stream of mixed humanity. There were brawny railroad workers, runaway for a holiday, gamblers and all-night revelers seeking beds, bullwhackers with their twenty-foot whips and marvelous profanity, six-mule team skinners from Camp Carlin, Irish soldiers from Fort Russell, Mexicans from Colorado towns and New Mexico, a liberal sprinkling of half-breeds hungry for rum, land speculators, merchants, freighters, contractors: men, women, and children from nearly every state in the Union. This seething population was composed of three classes: the energetically progressive, who built for a mighty commonwealth; the harmless and aimless transients, and the vicious.

Still shaky from his debauch Gorl held his massive head low, and, with his burly shoulders more rounded than usual, sullenly made his way to Cornforth Brothers' big warehouse at Eddy and 19th streets, in which Rogers & Company of the First National Bank of Denver had opened a branch. Staring straight ahead Gorl pushed his way into the warehouse, indifferent to those before him. Oblivious to the angry glances of those he shouldered from his path he led the way to the office of R. K. Mirrison, resident manager and partner. The latter glanced up from his littered table and rose to greet them.

Gorl gave his name and introduced his companion by saying, "Lee Darby. My new partner. I'm bringing you some business which should involve quite a bit of money."

"We're here for business. I've heard much about you, Mr. Gorl. How much credit do you want. Any large amount will have to be referred to the Denver office."

Gorl pursed his thick lips and sneered, "Nothing's so timid as a bank. A whisper will close one up like a clam in his shell."

"Not timid, Mr. Gorl, but careful," smoothly corrected the manager.

"A distinction without any difference," growled Gorl. "But you're no different than other banks."

"I hope not. Mr. Darby is a stranger to me. You have a high reputation as a business man when you are paying attention to business." And Darby knew the shrewd eyes had quickly read the story written in his companion's flushed face. "We're keen for more business in Cheyenne. If it's the right kind. But we wouldn't be interested, for example, in adding another saloon to the fifty odd already making money in this town."

"Thanks for nothing," Gorl stiffly replied. "I've supported quite a few saloons, but I've never owned one. I'm not here for a loan. Until I get around to establishing a bank that is a bank my business with you is to shift some thirty-thousand dollars from Ware's bank at Julesburg to this branch, and to instruct you to honor Darby's drafts up to that amount. Ware's bank will be shifted here very soon, and if you're not interested I can make different arrangements."

Gorl's bearing was insolent and ugly. The manager flushed slightly and his eyes narrowed. Yet he continued smiling, and insisted, "But we're a lot interested. What's the nature of your partnership?" And he turned to Darby.

The Southerner smiled slightly and confessed, "Gorl must give you the details. It's his suggestion. Has to do with selling portable houses."

Gorl impatiently cut in, "I don't see as it's material what my business is so long as I'm asking for no financial favors."

"All right. It's your money. We'll honor Mr. Darby's drafts. Our interest is solely confined to helping you and in that way help ourselves," agreed the manager.

Somewhat mollified Gorl replied, "Well, Darby's stated the proposition. A fortune can be made in selling ready-built houses, shipped in sections. I've drank rum in portables here, that came up the Platte with the U. P. Chicago can supply them in red brick, or brownstone fronts, with stucco or plain walls, made to order out of pine, and shipped in numbered sections so that six men can put up a block in a day, and two boys with a screwdriver can put up a dwelling in three hours. Right now I can buy a good graystone front with plain sides, twenty by forty, for three hundred dollars. Roof it with canvas. I can net seven hundred dollars on it here right now, or sell it for a thousand profit in towns to spring up west of here next season. A common tent rented for a hundred a day in Julesburg when shelter was hard to get. It'll have to be quick sales and big profits before permanent buildings can be erected. Darby will take orders. Delivery when the road reaches Cheyenne, which will be inside of two months. In less time the telegraph will be extended through from Laporte. We plan to have a monopoly in portables until the U. P. meets the Central Pacific."

"You'll have to have a quick turn-over. Once the towns are stabilized there will be but little business in ready-made buildings," remarked the manager.

"And there'll be no business in freighting and forwarding after this country is 'stabilized'," shortly added Gorl. "As the winter terminus this town must house ten thousand people at the least. I consider my business sense to be sound, sir."

"And I'm not criticising your business judgment, Mr. Gorl," sharply replied the manager. "We do worry when we think a customer is making a poor venture even when only his own money is involved. His failure deprives us of a customer. We want him to stay with us and grow. If we're selfish it's incidental to his welfare. We can't succeed unless our customers succeed. Far from condemning your plan I believe that sharp work and knowing when to let go will net you a mighty fat profit. We're here to make money by developing business. Between three and four hundred concerns are doing business here now. Some seventy are selling ten thousand dollars worth a month. Some few are selling thirty thousand a month. But the saloons, gambling and dance halls are taking too much money."

"I'm running none of those," impatiently reminded Gorl. "I come here to make money. I take the town as I find it."

"Of course. Of course. And we're mighty glad to have you with us. If you'll step around to Whitehead & Corlett's law office and get a paper, authorizing us to honor Mr. Darby's drafts we'll be ready to do our part."

Once they were in the street Darby remarked, "Wish you'd be an active partner Gorl, instead of simply furnishing the cash."

"Nonsense. Not enough to keep me busy if I handled it alone. You go ahead while I take a few days to get over this drunk. Well, men who are fools are worse off. They never get over that."

"But I don't even know if I'm business man enough to handle it."

"Find out. Mighty lucky to experiment at someone else's expense. But anyone can sell ready-made houses just as he can sell bacon and beans."

With this remark he forged ahead down Eddy street, his big shoulders bruskly clearing a path. Muttered curses and threats greeted the pushing, shoving tactics but the New England man did not appear to hear them. When pursuing a set course he was not accustomed to turn aside. They entered Judge Whitehead's building, the first substantial structure erected on Crow Creek. A tall, pale-faced young man, who had walked from Denver two months before, to become Whitehead's law partner, quickly drew up the necessary paper and pocketed ten dollars in greenbacks.

Back in the street Gorl announced his next objective was a drink and something to eat, and he insisted his new partner go with him. Securing a table in a canvas and board eating-place Gorl drank two glasses of liquor and seemed to enter a better mood. His gaze, always sharp and penetrating, grew a bit quizzical as he heard men at the bar loudly discuss Baltimore's lavish waste of nuggets. To Darby he whispered:

"Get hold of your friend. Tell him I'll finance an expedition to his gold country even if it takes a thousand or more men to put it through. No matter how many Indians there are. I'll organize strong enough to go through and bring back the gold."

"He can go and bring back what he wants without hinderance. He won't lead anyone into Sioux country. They killed his folks, but they brought him up."

"If he's such a damn Injun he don't care for gold it don't foller he has any right to keep the secret from us poor folks who does need it," roared a red-whiskered man, who carried two guns and a knife in his belt.

"Whisky Frank, Jack Hays' pal. Never did an honest tap in his life," murmured Darby.

"He must be found and made to talk," quietly added a tall, thin man, whose narrow face was drawn in melancholy lines. Unlike Whisky Frank he was neatly arrayed in a long black coat and clean boots and was clean shaven. He was one of the few men in the place who wore clean linen. His height was accentuated by the stovepipe hat resting on his straight black hair. In one hand he carried an umbrella, slovenly rolled. The umbrella was the only discordant note in his personal appearance.

"About as thick as a string," muttered Gorl.

"He's really dangerous. No empty blowhard. An apostate Mormon. Mixed up in the Mountain Meadow massacre," Darby whispered.

"According to your tell all these would-be killers are dangerous," jeered Gorl.

"Wouldn't take much of an effort to snap him in two."

The tall man swung around and slowly advanced to the table, his dark eyes resting thoughtfully on the New Englander's heavy face. Gorl stared truculently, his cold gray eyes refusing to flinch.

"You were talking about me, I believe," he told Gorl.

"If you're interested in what I say to my friend, yes. I was speaking about you. He remarked you are a dangerous man. I can't see it, and told him as much."

With a little apologetic cough the tall man continued, "And you really believe you can break me in two?"

"No doubt about it," promptly replied Gorl; and he unconsciously doubled an arm that was mighty of biceps.

WITH another little cough the tall man glanced back at the bar. Whisky Frank and two of his friends were watching eagerly, their lips parted in an expectant grin, their eyes round with pleasant anticipation. Facing the table again and holding his bulging umbrella clasped loosely before him the apostate Mormon announced:

"I fear it's my duty to prove to you that you're mistaken. And yet that's a very hard thing to do."

"Hardest job you ever tackled," heartily assured Gorl.

"I've shouldered a similar duty several times before this," continued the tall man. "The difficulty is to prove the truth to a man and keep him alive long enough so he understands it is a great truth."

"You're talking too much and saying too little,' growled Gorl, now becoming angry. "Get to work, or get out!"

Darby, leaning across the table and staring steadily at the apostate, and with one arm under the table sharply broke in, "Elder Keen, if you make a move to draw the gun you keep hid in that umbrella; it'll be your last move on earth. My friend is unarmed. I'm loaded. Right about face."

Keen hesitated and stared speculatively at the table. Undoubtedly Darby's concealed hand gripped a revolver. It might not, but—the long thin face changed none of its melancholy expression, but the man appeared to be holding his breath. For nearly a half a minute the two stared into each other's eyes. Then the hands clasped on the umbrella separated and slowly, the long arms dropped limply, reaching almost to the knees. Keen politely said:

"Your advantage, Brother Darby. Your advantage to-day." With that he wheeled and with long strides passed the bar and into the street.

Whisky Frank and his friends had no desire to investigate where Elder Keen had decided the hunting would be poor. They hastened into the street.

Gorl laughed shortly, then asked, "Why did you intrude? With those two drinks under my waistcoat I could maul a dozen of him."

Darby, now watching the street window sighed and answered, "You'd never have left your seat. He doesn't fight that way. Carrying a gun inside his big umbrella is one of his ways of getting the advantage. He's deadly when he goes into action. Well, they've gone and pretty soon I'll have to shoot it out with him. The Elder never forgets. It's mighty lucky for both of us he didn't call my bluff. I haven't a gun with me."

"By ——! That's rich! Fooled him! Outgamed him! He must be simple," declared Gorl. For the first time he felt great admiration for his companion. "Few minutes ago you was doubting your ability as a business man. Why, you'll sell whole streets of houses with that nerve."

"Fighting was my trade for four years. Selling ready-made houses is a cat of another color. As for Elder Keen being simple I don't stir from this place till I've borrowed a gun from the bar."

"You over estimate him. He's a coward." Then he turned to eat hurriedly, not because he was hungry but as a physical duty. Finishing he drew out Lawyer Corlett's paper, read it, and then passed it over and directed, "Get after orders. I'll have the money transfered as soon as possible. Now I must catch a little sleep."

"Gorl, whether I succeed or fail, I want you to understand I appreciate—"

"Bah! I've been looking for a sober man to make me some money while I'm fooling around. The real game would be to get Baltimore's secret and organize a big company and bring out a fortune in gold."

"As I've already explained to you he won't tell of any diggings in the Sioux country."

"And they murdered his folks! Then he is worse than a fool. However, someone will find it. In Indian country it may be; but no treaty, no amount of soldiers ever has, or can, keep white men out of a gold country. The devil himself can't do it."

"He won't tell."

Gorl smiled grimly and replied, "Maybe not to you, or any man. But wait until I've set Dollie after him. She'll get it."

CHAPTER TWO

STRAWBERRY SAM'S SECRET

DARBY set about seeking customers while handicapped by the fear he was not a good salesman. He lacked blustering enthusiasm. He was unable to simulate buoyant good fellowship. His stilted approach to a prospective customer was the result of self-consciousness, and often was misinterpreted. Some characterized him as being "stuck up." Even at that he could have developed an excellent market could he have made prompt delivery. This being impossible his determination weakened; of enthusiasm he had none. He had never sold anything in his life. He whipped himself by convincing himself he was a failure. He decided to find Gorl and effect a change in their plans, or dissolve their partnership.

Finding Lucky Gorl was a simple matter if one looked for him at night; but finding him sober was most difficult. It became quickly known that the New England man was a wild spender, and he was surrounded by the vicious and avaricious the moment he awoke from a drunken sleep and showed himself on the street. Liquor, gaming and women occupied his waking hours. He knew the adulation of these associates was make-believe, and yet he enjoyed it. He met Elder Keen and was treated with much politeness. He was proud to be hailed as well-met by a circle of outcasts. His vanity was obsequiously catered to even while his money was being filched. He was a burlesque king among desperate characters. He was quickly initiated to scenes of violence, and he further fed his egotism on the belief the criminal-minded would not turn against him.

Shooting affairs were too common to focus attention once the victim had been buried in the new cemetery. Every vice was on tap for those evilly inclined. Human scum floated in daily. Honest men were organizing a People's court to curb lawlessness until the territory of Dakota could provide formal tribunals. And Gorl, sleeping much through the day and abroad at night, was proud of his standing. In Rhode Island he had been one of many business men, living in a narrow rut. Now he was dramatizing himself into tragic roles. It pleased him to witness the swift change in a newcomer once a dance-hall girl or bad-man, whispered a warning word. One night he stepped between Jack Hays and an inoffensive victim and stayed the murderer's hand. The incident thrilled him. He was used to mastery in merchandizing, but this conquest of a wild beast was much more worth while. Gorl was not lacking in physical courage, nor was he a fool. He knew he bought leadership with the money he so lavishly scattered in various resorts. Bartenders and waiters were quick with service. Room was always made for him at the games. In recognizing the true status of his leadership he philosophized that every transaction has its *quid pro quo*. He was respected because of his money. Elder Keen was catered to because of his readiness to kill. He could not see much dissimilarity between himself and a desperado. One was armed with wealth: the other carried revolvers.

He was pleased when overhearing a teamster refer to him by saying, "That feller uses the lazy-board* and takes it easy. I see him when he made Hays quit."

This was an encomium. He was accustomed to praise for business sense. Now he would play the dual role of builder, and boss of those who would tear down. He could maintain this unique position by the simple process of making more than he spent.

Darby finally found him and the Spanish girl, late in the afternoon, in the back of the New Idea Saloon without the usual circle of attendants. Gorl was sober and in an ugly mood. Although believing the girl did not like him Darby drew up a chair to the table.

A waiter had just set a bottle of whisky in front of Gorl, who poured himself a drink and pushed the bottle forward and greeted:

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* Board extending from under wagon-bed and sometimes used, contrary to orders, by the teamster who was supposed to ride the near saddle mule. From the lazy-board the teamster could not see all his team of wheel, swing, and lead mules, six in all.

"Army of bartenders tell me you've been chasing me around. What's on your mind?"

"Scarcely chasing you, Gorl. Simply looking for an opportunity to talk over several matters," replied Darby, helping himself to a small dram.

"Drawn out all that money?"

"Not a penny of it," coldly replied Darby, who did not relish Gorl's tone.

"He could use your money, and did not?" gasped the girl.

"Shut up, Dollie. This is a business talk. Just what's the matter, Darby?"

"I'm a failure as a business man, I reckon. I can book orders for immediate delivery. Immediate delivery's impossible; or anything like it, even if we could use the telegraph."

"I can't furnish you with a telegraph line," bruskly reminded Gorl. "That's one thing even Allan Gorl's not up to. You'll have to take the situation as you find it. That was to be your part of the game. You speak of 'several matters'. What else?"

Men were streaming into the room. Darby glanced about and asked, "Can't I see you to-night, alone?"

The girl laughed shortly. Gorl scowled and asked, "Why not now? We're both here. I'll be playing faro to-night."

"Faro's a wicked game," mused Darby. "Watched a freighter stick to it last night till he'd coppered the tail of his last mule on the jack. To-night he'll be keeping cases and picking up the sleepers the greenhorns leave on dead cards."

"Señor is a padre!" shrilly exclaimed the girl; and her tinkling laugh was meant to be derisive.

"What's a mule-skinner got to do with me?" demanded Gorl. "If you want to talk business I'm listening. Later I shall be busy. At no time do I want to hear sermons."

Darby's lean face flushed, but before he could speak the girl was saying, "He worked so hard he mus' play."

Gorl patted her hand and loudly declared, "That's it. One life to live, and I've spent most of it being stiff-necked and uncomfortable. I'm fifty. If ever I get any fun out of life it must be now."

"To business then," shortly agreed Darby. "The freighting and forwarding business will make many fortunes. My experience in the army fits me for that. I know stock and I know men. I can honestly say I have executive ability. If you'll turn to that, or merchandising, I'm confident I can make you a lot of money. The thirty thousand you shifted to Rogers will more than answer."

Gorl drummed his thick fingers on the table and Darby believed he was thinking favorably of the suggestion when the Spanish girl gave a little cry of dismay, and exclaimed:

"So much to give for mules! To build beeg corrals. One lucky night at faro will make much more money. Amigo, you are called 'Lucky Gorl'. You leave your luck to watch mules?"

"Not by a long chalk! Darby, I'm Lucky Gorl because I use my brains. The little woman is right. The freighting and forwarding business will be overdone. The railroad will kill it inside of a year. I'd have a big sum tied up and fighting wholesale competition. My first judgment is best. Be first in a game and know when to quit. We'll stick to selling houses."

Darby hesitated, then surrendered. "All right. I'll go after them once more. Perhaps I've expected too much at the start. We'll probably do much better once we have some on the ground and can make immediate delivery after the road pushes west from here. I'll have to draw something for living expenses."

The girl laughed again, and Gorl, pleased the interview was ended, smiled good-naturedly and said, "Draw all you want to, Darby. What's amusing you, kitten?"

"I think Señor Darby ver' hungry to make side-money."

Gorl did not understand this, but he smiled broadly as he observed the Southerner's face was an angry red.

To leave no doubt as to her meaning the girl explained, "In gold camps a man will weigh dust over a ver' small piece of thick cloth. Dust falling from the scales hides in the cloth. The man weighing the dust has hands that go so." And she extended a small hand that trembled violently. "At night he wash out ten, fifteen dollars from the thick cloth and make good side-money."

"Ha! ha! You're too damn clever, Dollie. So that's side-money, is it?"

Darby rose and coldly said, "This woman tells you I seek a chance to steal from you, and you take it as a laughing matter."

Still amused, Gorl replied, "Shucks, Darby. She's the one who's making the side-money. Anyone says that about you and I'll break his neck."

"I can do my own neck-breaking when a man says it," stiffly replied Darby. "The partnership is dissolved."

"Don't act silly. Don't mind the little woman. They're all cats." But Darby was making for the door. Gorl lowered at the girl and angrily accused:

"You've cost me a friend, you little she devil!"

She passionately cried, "Go and find him. Keep with him. I do not like him. A ver' handsome young man will be glad to talk with me."

Gorl stared thoughtfully at the small, angry face without heeding it. He was remembering tremendous possibilities. If he knew Baltimore's secret he would organize a big expedition, big enough to stand off hostile Indians, and place Darby in command. Quickening his gaze he bent forward and told the girl:

"Next time you see that white Indian you make him talk. Make him tell where he got the gold he threw around like it was dirt. You've cost me a friend. Get the truth from that young fellow, or you'll lose a mighty good friend."

"I don't understand," she murmured.

"I do. That's enough for you to know. Now keep shut. I'm not telling the world my plans."

THIS was to warn her of the arrival of Elder Keen. The bartender ceased waiting on a clerk from Camp Carlin and hastily set forward a bottle and glass. Keen poured a drink and tossed it off and then swept the room with a glance. Beholding Gorl and his companion he stiffly advanced toward them, his bulky umbrella in his left hand. The girl seemed to grow smaller and her eyes were filled with fear as the killer came to a halt.

Gorl nodded toward Darby's chair and greeted, "Good afternoon, Elder. Take a chair and try the bottle. What's exciting?"

Keen turned the chair so he could watch the bar and door and said, "That young man who cut Hays' face with a handful of nuggets can't be found. Scoured the town for him. Sent riders out in a fiye mile circle. Hays acted like a fool. Wish I'd been there. He knows where gold is plenty. He won't mine it. He has no right to stop others from enjoying the great blessing. If I could be alone with him for thirty minutes I'm sure he'd tell me."

Gorl's few drinks had commenced to take effect. He felt the girl trembling violently as she leaned against him. He knew he never could arouse fear in her. His egotism was wounded. He truculently told the killer:

"I know of no law that compels a man to tell where he finds gold."

Keen jerked his head about, his eyes widening. Then he stroked his long chin and stared at the girl. In a low voice he said, "I don't like the tone you use, Gorl. It's the tone, not the words, mind you."

"I don't give a tinker's dam what you like, or don't like," growled Gorl.

The girl gave a convulsive start and stared in horror at the thin, narrow visage across the table. Keen slowly got on his feet and took time in adjusting the collar of his long black coat and in correcting the angle of his tall hat. He told Gorl:

"We won't quarrel. But I do hope you won't use that tone when any of the boys are around. It might set them on to do the same." With that he returned to the bar where his bottle and glass were waiting for him.

Gorl expanded his chest and told the girl, "What are you trembling for, you young fool? Afraid someone will harm you when you're with me?"

"He didn't drink," she whispered.

"He knows he can't bull-doze me. Knew it the first time we met and I told him I'd break him in two." He was in a good-natured mood again and smiled whimsically at his frightened companion.

The girl clutched his arm and whispered, "Oh, you don't understan'! He won't keel you while you spen' so much money. But if you lose all your money he will remember all you said."

"I'm not going to lose all my money. I can buy more gun-fighting than he can make. I carry money. He carries a gun in that umbrella. He doesn't ride over me."

She was silent for a minute, then said, "You spen' too much money. Some day you'll spen' the last dollar.. Don't spen' so much. Tell Señor Darby I ver' sorry. Put him up in beeg work. Mules, freighting. I'm afraid."

"You get the truth out of that Baltimore fellow. Then I'll have more money than the United States mint. Work fast when you get a chance as Keen's after the same plum."

She pressed his arm, fearful lest the killer should overhear them. But Keen now was deeply interested by the entrance of a roughly dressed man whose worn clothes and broken boots and long disheveled hair and beard would have stamped him as a piece of wreckage if not for the plump canvas bag held high in his right hand.

His step was slightly unsteady as he made for the bar. He slammed the bag down with violence and yelled, "Visitin' card of Strawberry Sam from Strawberry Gulch. How's it look, pard?" This to Elder Keen, whose gaze was fastened on the bag.

"It looks very fat and savory," slowly replied Keen. "Do you mind if I ask what's in it?"

"No, sirree! I'll show it to the whole world. But you talk like a damn Mormon," replied the man from Strawberry Gulch.

The bartender stooped to pick up something and remained out of sight. The Spanish girl crowded closer to Gorl. Keen slowly shook his head and with a grim smile replied, "Saw the error of my ways a long time ago. I've quit Brother Brigham's fold."

"I ain't keen to hear about it. Here, bartender, shake out a universal drink from the bag. Plenty more where it come from."

A dozen men hurriedly entered. On beholding the prospector they pretended indifference. Keen knew they had been following the man and he made a little gesture with the umbrella for them not to intrude. They ranged up along the bar. The bartender took the bag and wet his lips. As he was untying the string he informed the prospector, "This gen'l'man beside you is Elder Keen."

"Thought he looked damned Mormonish. Shove out the liquor." Crowding against Keen as he stared down the line he invited, "Everyone drink to Strawberry Sam from Strawberry Gulch."

Significant glances were exchanged. The gaze of those watching the prospector was wolfish. The bartender's unsteady hands finally opened the bag and he dumped out enough tiny nuggets to make the bar free for a day. Elder Keen reached forward and tapped a long finger on the man's wrist and cautioned:

"Be careful. You're nervous. You've taken too much. . . . Here, let me help you." And he took the bag and replaced all the gold except one small nugget. Then he handed the bag to its owner and genially announced:

"To the good health of Strawberry Sam, who might well be called Generous Sam."

Bottles clinked, glassed were raised; and Sam discovered he liked the Elder. "You're neighborly, Parson," he insisted as he emptied his glass. "I like neighbors. I've been so long hunting for that stuff—Lawd, but wan't it lonesome!"

"Of course you were lonesome. You should have had companions. Liquor up again all hands. There's enough left in that nugget for many drinks. Is that right, sir?" The last to the bartender.

"Whatever you say is right, Elder. Bottles before you. Help yourselves," quickly replied the bartender.

Keen continued, "So, friend Sam, you found this little treasure in Strawberry Gulch at this end of South Pass, I believe."

Sam finished his drink and grinned humorously at the eager line of faces. He told Keen, "Them's your words, not mine. I'm from Strawberry Gulch. That don't mean I ain't wandered a heap to other places. A fortune in Strawberry Gulch! That's prime! Folks found gold there more'n ten years ago. But all they took out and will take out ain't nothing to what I can uncover in a day's work."

Elder Keen drew in a deep breath and removed his tall hat and wiped the moisture from his forehead. Jack Hays entered and took in the situation at a glance. He would have crowded in beside the prospector if Keen had not motioned for him to hold back. Keen replaced his hat and remarked:

"Not in Strawberry Gulch, of course, friend Sam. I might have known no big strikes have been made there. And you've wandered far and have been lonesome. The Big Horns are lonely and dangerous."

"Them's your words, mister. Not mine," chuckled the prospector and smiling cunningly at the scowling face of Hays. "Mebbe I found the spot where the Frenchman went to in '62, after he quit the stage crossing on the Sweetwater. Mebbe I found the Frenchman's bones. Poor devil!"

With a glance Keen restrained Hays' violent desire to choke the truth from the prospector. Red spots showed in his thin cheeks; but his voice was low as he told the group, "Sam is a good friend to all good fellows. But he can't be pushed, nor crowded into talking. He's been in the Big Horns alone so long he's fair drunk with happiness to be back here where there's no danger. Think of the lonely days when he had to watch out for Injuns! Think of his trouble in getting enough to eat, and of his difficulty in entering and leaving the country!"

This speech had a strong effect on the prospector. He began to pity himself. Tears came to his bleared eyes. He leaned against the bar and told the wolves, "Parson hit it right in the eye. Life's been plain hell for months. Injuns most caught me more'n once. But old Sam knew the stuff was there, and he stuck."

"Like the stout hearted fellow you are!" hoarsely cried Keen.

"If I'd had old Fevernager with me I'd fetched out a wagon-load," continued Sam.

With a hissing intake of breath, Keen stared into the vacuous face, then gestured for the men to cease crowding. In a low, coaxing voice he remarked, "A wagon-load! As much as that? And you brought only this bag!"

"Fetched out several pounds. More'n enough to last till I find Fevernager. Makes your eyes bung out, eh?" And he leaned against the bar and laughed uproariously.

"TAKE me out!" the Spanish girl frantically whispered to Gorl. "He will keel ver' soon."

Gorl was too deeply interested to lose any of the drama. Nor did he believe Elder Keen would lose control of his temper when a fortune was at stake. He rested a hand on the girl's shoulder and waited. Jack Hays edged forward. Without looking at him Keen pressed his open hand against the desperado's face and violently pushed him back. To Strawberry Sam he said:

"Several pounds, er? But you shouldn't be carrying it around in your clothes, Friend Sam. There are desperate men in Cheyenne. Leave it with the express office, or with the bartender here."

"Your words, not mine," repeated Sam.

The repetition of this phrase brought color to Keen's thin cheeks. Gorl gripped the edge of the table, expecting a terrible denoument. Sleeping animalism was stirring within him. He knew Keen's ferocious temper was under a terrible strain; and he would not have missed the thrill the scene was affording for several thousands of dollars. The girl was on the verge of a hysterical outbreak. Keen surprised Gorl by stepping back and casually saying:

"Some of you boys look around for Sam's friend, the old plainsman. Sam has been drinking and needs a friend to put him to bed, and to care for his several pounds of gold. Bartender, the house drinks on me."

He placed no money on the bar but the drinks were quickly served. Turning to the table he said to Gorl, "You're joining us, I hope?"

Gorl nodded good-naturedly and although he had a bottle before him the bartender brought another. Gorl slowly poured his drink. He was quick to detect the sudden change in the men at the bar. They appeared to have lost their interest in Strawberry Sam. Keen stood with his back to the prospector, conversing with Jack Hays. The prospector did not relish drinking alone. He crowded between the two desperadoes and told Keen:

"If I can have two months at my mine I'll bring out enough gold to own this crazy town."

"Exactly. Of course. Save your dust. Be wise. Don't wake up busted and all your gold on the wrong side of the bar," advised Keen.

"This little bag? Ho! ho! This is just to throw to the birds. I'll take a crack at every table-game in town before morning."

"Save out a grub-stake. Be prudent," continued Keen. And forthwith he took Sam by the arm and walked to one side and talked briefly with him. The prospector hurled his glass on the bar and denounced the gathering as being "onneighborly," and turned to leave the place.

"Fool! They'll stop him! It's a showdown!" whispered Gorl. "Now I'll show my power."

He started to rise, but the girl clutched his hand and whispered, "They won't hurt him. Not now. Keen will keel when he's ready. But not now; not here. Not till he fin's out the poor man's secret."

That she understood the banditti's technique was proven by Strawberry Sam's departure. The men at the bar appeared to be indifferent to his going and he was on the street without anyone following him.

Gorl rose to his feet, relieved that the stranger had come to no harm, and yet condemning the outcasts for being so many sheep. As he swaggered to the door with the girl on his arm the latter stared in fright at Elder Keen, who lifted his tall hat and smiled grimly. Furious jealousy assailed Gorl as he sensed his companion's fear of the man. He would have given much to have known she was afraid of him. He believed he must assert himself somehow to offset the killer's grim smile. He halted and told Keen:

"I'm just remembering, Elder, you didn't drink with me when you were at my table, although later I drank with you."

Hays and the others were worried. Keen relieved them from all fear of having a rich supply of easy money cut off by heartily replying, "We'll drink with you now, Brother Gorl. It was mighty kind of you to overlook my lack of manners and drink with me. Boys, we'll drink with the only Easterner we've met who's worth a damn."

Gorl tossed a greenback on the bar and paused to go through the ceremony. Hays smiled in relief and declared, "To the best sport on Crow Creek, or anywhere else."

"We know it!" warmly added Keen.

Gorl knew, however, it was his money they loved. He was deeply irritated as he gained the street. He no longer could make himself believe it was as desirable to be catered to because of wealth as for proficiency with a Colt revolver. Now he was wishing he could command respect as a deadly man. His companion aroused him by saying:

"I mus' go back. Ora, the Utah girl, is ver' seeck."

"You should have told me. I'll hunt up a doctor."

"She has had medicine and a doctor. Everything money can get out here. She is seeck here." And she pressed a hand to her chest.

Gorl softened. "You're a good girl, Dollie. Get any help you can for your friend. Tell them Lucky Gorl is paying."

"Thank you, my frien'. But we can bury our own dead." And with a bleak face she turned and was quickly lost in the milling crowd.

Undecided where to go Gorl walked in the direction the girl had taken, toward the Overland Stage company's barn on 19th street. Almost all the men he passed were openly armed. Acting on an impulse Gorl turned into a general store and asked to be shown some revolvers. After the proprietor had produced several and had watched Gorl's awkwardness in handling them, he was impelled to remark:

"You're not used to guns. You'll get along better without one."

Gorl flushed and put back the weapon he was about to buy. "Every man's new to them at first," he insisted.

"True. But at your age it's more difficult to get the knack."

"You're right," admitted Gorl. "I'm too old to learn new tricks." As he was leaving he saw a display of hunting knives and came to a halt. "Here. I'll take one of these. At least I've got brains enough to use one if I have to."

"I'd advise you not to wear one, sir," continued the storekeeper. "There's a trick in using a knife. If you had one on and got into trouble one of two things would likely happen. You'd be too slow in getting started, and yet give your enemy a legal excuse for killing you; or you'd be too quick, and probably be hauled before a People's court. When it's known you carry no weapons even our roughs will hesitate to do you mischief unless they catch you alone in the dark and kill to rob you. In that case you'd have no show even if you had a belt full of weapons."

"All right, neighbor," sighed Gorl. "I've managed so long without any I'll keep on the same way.

Yet he was chagrined to know he lacked knife and gun-cunning. He was ashamed of his desire to be esteemed by thugs for dexterity with lethal weapons. He essayed to oust the ambition from his mind by telling himself it was immaterial what his inferiors believed. This line of thought was suddenly interrupted by coming face to face with Darby.

"TURN back with me, Darby. I'm lonely," he greeted.

"You had company when I saw you last," reminded Darby as he faced about.

"And she's mighty sorry for what she said. She wanted me to tell you that."

"It doesn't matter," stiffly replied Darby. "I wasn't getting any results. Probably natural for her and others to think I was living off you."

"That's foolish. I want you to change your mind about quitting me. We'll agree on some plan that's a quick money-maker. I can think of a dozen once I take time off and search my mind."

"You could think of a hundred. But I've made arrangements to supply fresh and smoked meats to the market. I had tentatively agreed to do that when I took up with your proposition. Now I'm going through with it. Much obliged to you just the same. And, Gorl, why don't you stop this worse than foolish fast living and buckle down to work? A man with your head ought to be ashamed for wasting his time."

Gorl was pleased with the tribute, yet he grumbled, "Always preaching. You never will understand me. Cooped up in the East all my life. All my life hungry for something outside of routine. I'll whirl around a bit longer and then jump into something big."

"I'm afraid you'll whirl around too long. This isn't preaching. I wish you well. I'd like to see you on top of the heap. There's so much you can do."

"So much I will do. A few drunks won't stop me. I'll show them how to make real money before I'm through. . . . You carry a gun?"

"Yes."

"How long would it take me to get the hang of it?"

"Someone would pot you before you could get started. You're safer without a gun. I'd like to add something else, if you'd take it as I mean it, in friendship."

"Go ahead," Gorl encouraged.

"The gang you've thrown in with at times will knuckle down to you until your money's gone. Then look out. You pulled Jack Hays away from a man he was about to kill. He'll never forget that. And he's several cuts below other desperadoes here in Cheyenne."

Gorl recalled what the Spanish girl had said about Elder Keen. It troubled and angered him to hear it repeated by Darby. By an effort he suppressed his ire, and insisted, "But I'm not going to lose my money. That's a crazy idea. In a few days I'm to see General Stevenson at the fort and talk over some big contracts. Money I'm blowing in now is just pocket-change."

"Then you're a mighty lucky man," sighed Darby. "Your gambling losses, as talked about on the street, would be a small fortune to me. Now I'll be turning back."

"Oh, stick along. I'm lonesome. I'm walking out to the dance-tent where Dollie stays."

"No. I must get about arranging for my trip. I'm joining Fevernager. And I don't care for the dance-places."

Gorl insisted. "But this isn't any shindig I'm going to. One of the girls is dying. I must see if there's anything money can do for her."

"That's fine of you, Gorl. God knows they need much help and real kindness. I'll walk along with you. That phase of life out here is worse than anything I saw during the war."

They walked on in silence and turned from 19th street before reaching the stage barn and made for a long building of wood and canvas. As they neared the entrance they heard a pistol shot and a sharp outcry. Gorl leaped ahead to the door and Darby kept at his heels.

They were in time to see Whisky Frank pushing a revolver back into his belt, while Elder Keen snatched up a stool and attempted to brain him from behind. Jack Hays caught the upraised arm and yelled for the Elder to wait. On the floor was Strawberry Sam, mortally wounded. As Gorl and Darby came to a halt and stared at the gruesome scene the Spanish girl suddenly appeared in the doorway between the bar and dance-hall and shrilly cried:

"Stop your fighting! A woman is dying in here!"

Strawberry Sam stared up at his slayer and faintly asked, "Who here knows and likes Fevernager, old plainsman?"

Elder Keen dropped the stool and stepped forward. But Darby was before him and kneeling beside the dying man. "Not that tall man!" whispered Strawberry Sam.

Darby slipped a hand inside the bosom of his coat to the gun he carried under his left arm, and turned a baleful glance on the silent, staring spectators and raised his free hand in a gesture for Keen to keep back.

Keen came to a halt and stood rigidly erect, his bulging umbrella held before him, his dark eyes reflecting his murderous intentions. "You come between me and my dying friend?" he whispered.

"If I pull this gun you'll be dead ahead of him. Keep back! No funny business with that umbrella," warned Darby.

"Quick!" whispered Strawberry Sam. "Hogged out my luck. Bend down."

Watching Keen and his friends Darby lowered his head. Jack Hays whispered over Keen's shoulder, but the latter shook his head and folded his arms, the umbrella dangling from one hand. Strawberry Sam whispered in Darby's ear:

"Tell old Fevernager Black Hills is lousy with gold."

Elder Keen stared fixedly at Darby until the death rattle told the Southerner he need listen no longer. Coming to his feet Darby glared at Whisky Frank and murmered, "You miserable, cowardly murderer!"

"Worse'n that!" hoarsely added Elder Keen. "He's killed millions in placer gold!"

"I thought he was pulling a gun," weakly defended Whisky Frank.

"A gun, you fool? He was reaching for the fattest bag of nuggets a man ever see," continued Keen, his low voice vibrating with terrible rage. "Now you've stopped him from telling us where he got it."

Others in the group lowered malevolently. Put to his defense Whisky Frank insisted, "I oughter been told. He was just a wild man reaching for a gun when we had our fuss. And the secret ain't lost if he told it to that feller." And he pointed a trembling finger at Darby.

"And he did tell you?" asked Keen.

"He did. And I am to pass it on to his old friend," replied Darby.

Elder Keen's lips twisted in an incredulous smile. Straightening his thin face he stridently insisted, "It's too big a secret for one man to keep, or any dozen men. There's gold enough for thousands. That dead man had no right to keep the truth from us. It'll take a strong force to enter and leave the Injun country. Tell the poor man's friend. Tell us. Tell all Cheyenne. It's your duty."

Darby snarled back, "Duty! And that murderer is to go along and profit by his murder?"

Keen's eyes glistened, and he gravely assured, "No. He sha'n't profit by his terrible mistake."

"Nor will you. Now let's see you and your damn hounds shoot it out of me."

Hays and the tall man called "Shorty", edged forward as if to accept the challenge. Keen motioned for them to keep back. He was now composed and was realizing the secret was not lost so long as one living man carried it in his head. Before he, or any man, could speak, a thin voice rose in the back room. The girl from Utah was singing as she stepped over the rim of life:

The spirit of God like a fire is burning,
The latter day glory begins to come forth;
The visions and blessings of old are returning,
The angels are coming to visit the earth.

The silence in the barroom continued after the singing ceased until the Spanish girl again appeared and told Gorl:

"My frien', there is something you can do."

"Best to be had in town," huskily assured Gorl. "I'll see to everything." And he turned and hurried from the place.

Darby backed to the door, but there was no danger for him now. Elder Keen hurried after him, and began, "You've got the wrong idea of this. I befriended Strawberry Sam last night. That fool, Whisky Frank, believed he was about to be plugged. No head. No brains."

"I'm not trying Whisky Frank. A People's court will get him if someone doesn't kill him," coldly replied Darby.

"You and I have nothing in common."

"Just a moment," insisted Keen. "Strawberry Sam was my friend. He would wish me to share in his find. I want you to repeat what he told you."

"Of course you do. Well . . . yes . . . I'll tell you," slowly muttered Darby. "But not here. Not now."

"When? Where?" hoarsely demanded Keen.

"When you are dying," softly answered Darby. "Something tells me you and I will meet again like this, and you will be the one on the floor."

Keen's mouth opened but he did not speak. He was striving his utmost to refrain from killing the Southerner, and thereby lose the secret for all time. Darby had his hand inside his coat, waiting and watching the long hand clutching the umbrella. As the two stood thus Whisky Frank hurriedly emerged through the doorway, calling back over his shoulder:

"You fellers oughter told me. You'll have to swear it was self-defense. Man talks loud and makes a move for a gun. I reckoned I must shoot, or be killed."

Keen dropped his umbrella and wheeled to face the assassin, and extended a long arm. His bony hand shook violently as he commanded:

"Give me your gun!"

"For God sakes, Elder! Don't!" cried the murderer.

"Give me your gun!"

As if under a spell Whisky Frank slowly drew the heavy forty-four and handed it over, butt first.

Grasping the weapon Keen without a word raised it and bought the barrel down on the man's head, sending him to the ground unconscious and .saved from a fractured skull only by his hat and thick thatch of hair.

In the following chapters
Darby and Elder Keen
clash at Robbers' Roost.

The GOLD CARRIERS

A Story of Australia by an Australian

LOUIS KAYE

THE dark-foliaged eucalyptus trees stood stiff and still in the afternoon heat. They appeared not to be living things at all, but to be formed of colored wax, so still they were. There was not a breath of wind stirring across that desolate tract of South Australia.

There were two men heading east. Both walked, and a camel was not even led by them, which was strange in a region where the camel is almost as indispensable as on the Sahara. Each carried a blanket, rolled along with his coat, strapped to his shoulders. And each carried, besides his rifle, canvas water-bags and iron-sacks slung both from pack and waistbelt.

Alike in outfit, they were also alike in looks.

The man who walked on the left was tall and bearded, and he walked with a steady bent-kneed stride. His name was Fletcher. The man on the right was tall and bearded, and clad, like his companion, in dungaree trousers and gray flannel shirt and wide-brimmed felt hat. His name was Dawson, and he differed from Fletcher in one respect.

He walked with a limp. It was in his right leg. When you first noticed the limp you thought he was stiff in the knee-joint, yet the trouble was not there. It was in the ankle. Each time he began his stride his right foot twisted abruptly outward a matter of two or three inches. Simultaneously it tilted downward, so that at the beginning of each stride the toe dragged a little in the sand. Looking at his tracks you could see the furrows plainly.

There are ways of identifying a man even though his face be masked. The trained eye makes no mistake, and sometimes there are signs by which even the untrained eye can tell. It may be a trick of gesture, the way a man holds his cigarette, the way he fingers his beard or chin or rubs his ear. The way he smiles or speaks or walks.

A man's walk is sometimes his death-trap. After years of tramping across a country, his stride assumes a style peculiarly its own. While he remembers he may change it, but in a moment of forgetfulness he walks as he has been in the habit of walking, and then the trained eye picks him out. In this respect a trained eye is almost essential.

But Dawson's limp was easily recognizable. You could go years without ever finding a limp like it. That little twist and drag of his toe branded him with a brand as unmistakable as a Maltese Cross on a steer's rump.

They were heading for Oodnadatta, which is the end of the railroad that runs north from Adelaide toward the hot heart of the island-continent. They had met the evening before and all day, as they had headed east, Fletcher had cast sideways glances at Dawson's limp.

Several times he had dropped slightly to the rear so that he could observe it the better. And each time the expression in his eyes was the same. He had the look of a man deeply and diabolically thoughtful.

NIGHTFALL they camped. The sun had gone down amidst red-splashed clouds. The trees had stood silent and still like soldiers at attention. Then when the sun had gone they began to wave their branches a little, as a breeze wafted up from the south.

Dawson had built and lit a fire and was boiling a billy of water. When it began to bubble and steam, he took it off the fire and slipped into it half a palmful of tea. The tea they drank scalding hot, without milk and heavily sugared.

For food they ate damper baked the day before and hard as cement, and corned beef that had become dry through long carriage. They sat on their blankets and watched the last splashes of color vanish off the clouds.

"She's been a scorcher today," said Dawson.

His companion nodded and took another swig of tea. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sought for pipe and tobacco in the rear pocket of his dungaree trousers.

Puffing smoke between his lips, he remarked: "It'll take us all of four days to make Oodnadatta. It's slow going without camels."

"That's so," nodded Dawson. "But I don't care if it's four days or four weeks, so long as I make it. There's always something to look forward to."

"A blowout in Oodnadatta and that gold of yours all gone up in beer, eh?" Fletcher laughed dryly.

"No," said Dawson, shaking his head. "No, I'm going home, partner. There's never been any doubt which way I'm headed. I'll be in San Francisco before three months are up."

Fletcher turned his head and regarded him out of eyes as cold and gray as a winter sky. "It's a long way to go," he remarked.

"Not so long going there as coming here," said Dawson, with a little laugh. He swung his arm toward the south. "Ten years ago, partner, I landed on the coast off a schooner out of San Francisco. The old man missed his reckoning and piled her on the rocks. Me, I got through without swallowing half the ocean, and then I came up in here. Since then I ain't seen a city street nor heard a newsboy holler about the latest murder. But now, partner, I'm going back if I have to—well, walk."

"There's nothing like knowing where you're headed," nodded Fletcher.

All the bright color had vanished from the sky now, save the yellow twinkles which were the first-showing stars. The south wind sighed through the trees, and shadows draped the land. Then the moon rose, shedding silver light everywhere. The trees, the breeze falling, were still again.

At the men's feet the fire died down to red ashes, whose glow faded to a paler and paler hue. Round their heads droned a tribe of mosquitoes, at which, now and again, they made savage swipes. They were still smoking and squatting on their blankets.

In a moment or two Dawson turned his head and gazed through the bush. Some dark figures were moving among the trees. There must have been a couple of dozen of them. They passed the camp a hundred yards or so to the south, traveling west. Then they vanished.

"Blacks," said Dawson. "Come across from over east. Well, they'll keep traveling till they strike water across in the west there. Glad they never camped here."

"Why?" asked Fletcher.

"I hate the swine!" said Dawson with unwonted truculence. And then he fell silent.

They both were silent for upward of an hour. Then they spoke only to say good night. Rolled in their blankets they let their eyelids shut out the twinkling of the stars above. Dawson slept and slept soundly.

He slept the sleep of a man who does not wake again.

EARLY dawn found Fletcher ready to travel east alone. In the light of the stars he had labored for an hour or more. Off in the sand he had scraped a shallow cavity, and back into the cavity and over what lay in the cavity he had heaped sand. The man he had killed was buried. It was not likely the grave would be found for days, or weeks, or even months. And nobody could be sure he had found Dawson, nor be sure that here was a death that was not a natural death.

Fletcher went on alone with the gold. It was not much gold. No such quantity as this had ever made a man rich. But it could make a man rich enough to go for awhile without working. It would carry a man out of the country too. And that was what Fletcher was thinking as he gazed at the gold in the little leather sack.

"I'll get down south with it and pick up some steamer," he told himself. "And nobody'll ever know I'm not Dawson."

He tried to make himself Dawson. He tried to auto-suggest himself into the belief that he was Dawson. He looked like Dawson and he spoke like Dawson and he knew something of Dawson's history. But more —he walked with an exact replica of Dawson's limp.

Or maybe it was not quite exact yet. But he would make it so before very long. He was the essence of patience, and possessed a determination of spirit calculated to override such obstacles as stood between him and the perfection of his plan and the limp.

He had not watched Dawson's walk for nothing. The outward jerk and downward tilt of the toe, he practised and practised as he walked. He looked behind him and saw with satisfaction the toe-drag in the sand. The thing for him to do was to keep on going as he was, to practise and practise that limp not only till he had it perfect but till it had become a habit. He wanted it so that if any time he forgot it, it would still go on. There must be no loophole for defeat to enter into his scheme of things.

He was traversing a country almost flat and arid. If there had been no trees it would have been desert. There was no grass, nor any suspicion of grass. The earth was dry and sandy right up to the butts of the trees, and what lesser growth there was showed in clumps as parched and dry and twisted as a wind-distorted tree long dead.

Often Fletcher swung a water-bag and lifted it to his lips. And because he was in nowise short of water and because water, at this time of year, was not altogether nonexistent on the way, he drank much with few scruples. At noon he reached a claypan, anyway, and refilled his water-bags.

He headed on again an hour later. Rightly, he should have halted awhile before noon and not started again till somewhere round two o'clock. But a man who travels fast must put up with a little heat. And Fletcher, though he was not afraid of pursuit, was making a steady pace. He wanted to reach Oodnadatta within four days and catch the train south. The gold was burning a hole in the leather bag, and to a man who had had no gay time for years the prospect of a gay time is like a rare butterfly to a bug-hunter.

The country now grew more hilly. Once he crossed a muddy creek. Another time he struck a gully fairly thickly timbered. But he was beyond that now, traveling with a stride that never slackened, though the ankle employed to copy a dead man's limp ached most damnably.

The hottest part of the day gone the going was easier. Yet it was not cool, and a man sweated till his clothes clung damply to his body. The sun's rays were weaker, but the bush was more stifled. The trees seemed as if transfixed in blocks of tangible yet translucent heat. And the western sky was the color of blood. But then the sun was gone and night was come and Fletcher camped.

He camped with the glaringly white trunk of a lonesome paperbark tree behind him and above him the heavy foliage almost shut out the stars.

He didn't bother much about looking at the stars. The only use stars were to him was as guiding signs, but these he did not need as he was not traveling by night. He built and lit his fire and boiled a billy of water, made his tea, drank it with a throat inured to heat, and ate his scanty fare. He was running short of meat, but he had plenty of flour and with this flour he baked damper. Then he let his fire die down and rose to his feet and paced slowly back and forth.

Twenty minutes later when he sat again on his blanket, he told himself: "I reckon she's perfect now. It's Dawson's limp as sure as you could make it."

Then for ten or fifteen minutes he massaged his ankle. It was still aching with the unusual twisting and flirting he had given his foot. No matter, since the muscles and sinews and nerves were adjusting themselves to the changed action. The gold he carried, though it was not a fortune, was worth a little trouble and a little pain.

"Thing I must do, though," he told himself before sleeping, "is not to forget I'm lame. It'd be all up if anybody saw me walking lame and then not walking lame. Men ain't got eyes for nothing."

THERE was the dawn paling the sky when he broke camp again. He had crossed a ridge and was heading up over another before the sun rose. This event was the signal for a lot of crow-cawing and parrot-screeching.

Toward noon he took a shot at a running kangaroo standing half as high as himself. He killed it with his first shot, and in a trice had it skinned and enough meat to last him the rest of the journey. The meat he would cook on the fire at noon.

It had become vastly hot now. Tiny streams of sweat trickled down Fletcher's bearded cheek, dropping from the bottommost part of the gray-brown whiskers. His eyes smarted with the salt moisture that ran into them.

And the limiting of his visibility brought about by this was enhanced by the heat-mist that hung over the land. The nearer trees now danced in a shimmer, but the farthermost ones were almost concealed by a pale and pearly mist that was like a very fine fog or a very fine smoke. Yet there was probably no fire of any appreciable size within a couple of hundred miles or more.

This time when he camped at noon he was a little longer in getting a start again. He did not strike east till about two o'clock. He was a man who thought and planned far ahead. He expected to reach Oodnadatta within three days, but there were sometimes accidents. He aimed to have plenty of time on hand, to travel with discretion, and to enter the settlement at one particular hour.

The hour would be just off dusk. He wanted the daylight so that everybody would see his limp. To enter the settlement after dark and have nobody see his limp would be a deplorable waste of good labor. Moreover, that limp, being an alibi, was important beyond words. It must be known in the settlement that Dawson had gone south. The limp would be an advertisement for all to read. So he would time his arrival, striking in from the bush just before dusk.

He cooked the kangaroo meat over the fire. There was a lot of it. There was too much of it. So he did not cook it all, but threw some of it away. Then what he had cooked he packed in the ration sacks. After which he kicked the fire out, smothering it with earth and sand, and took up his pack.

He had scarce gone fifty yards when he pulled up suddenly and blasphemously. He looked behind him at his tracks. There was no toe-drag showing in the sand. That proved how careful a man would have to be. The thing hadn't settled on him as a habit, after all. There, but a few seconds after thinking of the limp, he had forgotten and walked normally.

He walked on again, limping.

There was a wind stirring, but it was a hot wind for it came from the north. It came down across a land that stretched interminable leagues of sunbaked country across its trail. And as it passed over these leagues it gathered to itself more and more heat until its breath was like a draft from a furnace.

Steadily it pressed against Fletcher's side. It was like a great hot hand gently pushing him. He could feel the warmth of it eating into his body. And around him, as the haze grew stronger, little eddies of sand showed. Once a big spiral came whirling down close by. In its sandy grasp it twirled branches and leaves and dead sticks, and the sound it made as it spun by was like hail on an iron roof.

Others like it appeared later on. The country, though the sun was sliding down the western sky, grew hotter and hotter. The wind grew stronger and stronger, and the voice of it louder and louder. It sighed and moaned and groaned. It muttered threats, savage and sinister. The birds went forlornly before it, and no animals were seen at all, though afar off there sounded, melancholy and long-drawn, the voice of a dingo.

The trees were waving their arms now like shipwrecked mariners frantically signaling. Strips of bark were torn off them to fly away in the wind. Leaves were torn off them, and sometimes a whole branch came adrift. And now there were not eddies and spirals of sand and dust traveling south; there was one dust storm, and the whole air, the whole world seemingly, was filled with dust. Through it the trees stood in ghostly shapes, and over to the west there was a film the color of blood masking the sun. It was as if the sky had been wounded.

And then the wind eased down. The sighing and the moaning and the groaning also eased down. The film of dust thinned and thinned, and the bloody smudge in the west became a smudge through which now could be seen in distinct shape the circle of the sun. And the wind still eased down, till pretty soon there was hardly any of it left, and far from enough to stir the sand up and waft it away in spirals.

Half an hour later it was quiet again. And the quiet was strange after the uproar. It was almost unnerving. There was not a sound, not even a bird gave voice, nor was any life anywhere visible. It was as if the wind had killed the land, had choked and smothered it with dust.

But Fletcher went slowly and inexorably on. His eyes smarted with the dust, and the sweat had caked dust on him and the heat had sapped strength out of him. Yet for him there was nothing out of the ordinary in that smother of sand and in that devastating heat. He had weathered many such storms, and at no time had he spared himself. He was as lithe and hard and active at forty-five as he had been at five and twenty.

Since he had chosen to travel alone he had not seen white man or black. The blacks he had seen passing the camp that night and Dawson were the only human beings he had seen in the weeks. Being a man who had dwelt much alone he did not notice the loneliness.

The bush was never lonely to him, anyway. He had been in it too long. It had a voice that spoke to him when the trees whispered and when the dingoes wailed and when the parrots screeched. The heat that surged up from the sunsmitten earth was to him like a friendly embrace. He belonged where he was, or in any other such solitude, and his feet were used to trails where lone men walked.

BUT over him now, as sometimes happens to such men, was come a sudden faithlessness to the wild mistress he served. A vast profligacy became manifest. No longer did the austere life of the wild please. There was a hunger for the fleshpots and the comforts and the hectic life of the towns, the life that he would find in the towns. He yearned for the gilded nights, the wine and the women and the song. And all these, with the gold he carried, he would buy.

All at once he stopped. A deer, suddenly startled, might stand hesitant in the same fashion as did he. And even as a deer would turn its head to see what menaced it, so did Fletcher turn his head.

And then he started to rock as he stood, and the rocking became worse and he swayed and spun and beat the air with his arms and felt hot blood on his breast and looked with wide eyes at death. Down he flopped like a slain animal—down and over in a roll from back to face and face to back again, so that he stared now up at the sky. And staring thus he ceased to see anything.

He never saw the bearded face above him, nor felt the fingers that robbed him of his pack and of his gold. With the leather sack that contained this gold in his hand the man who had killed turned his face to the east and then to the south.

Then again he looked down at the man he had killed. "Hard luck for you you limped," he said, "or I mightn't have known you was Dawson. Well, they said you had some gold—"

The name of this killer was Burton. Forty-five or so he must have been; no more probably, for his beard had brown in it as well as gray. And tall he was and thin, with the physical appearance of either Dawson or Fletcher. Yet he was just a shade shorter than Fletcher, and he had quick jerky movements and a voice more sharp and less drawling than either of the men who lay dead. These differences, though, were not likely to trouble him. In a settlement where Dawson was but a shadowy figure whose habitat was the bush and whose intimate friends were few and who was known more as a man who limped than a man who was named Dawson—in such a settlement a man had but to limp a certain way and so long as he looked like Dawson, he could pass through and go south by train without question.

And Burton had the patience and the methodical mind to put that limp into practise. Lying amidst a clump of mulga he had watched the man whom he had taken to be Dawson approaching. He had watched the limp closely. And he had seen the tilt and twist of the foot. Once before he had seen Dawson and he remembered the limp for he had remarked on the toe-drag in the sand and thought how easy such a man would be to track.

"There'll be nobody tracking me, though," he told himself. "The blacks wouldn't bother, and it's not likely any white man'll be along this way. Dawson was traveling no beaten track, and that same bit of bush might go a dozen years without anybody passing over it."

Behind him the sun was splashing the western clouds with amber and crimson and gold. He did not look back to see how far off setting the sun was; he kept right on till the shadows vanished from under the trees and dusk began to deepen. Then he camped, building his fire and cooking his evening meal, and afterwards leaning back against a tree and smoking.

That night he rolled himself in his blankets early, and slept early and soundly till the vague chill that heralded the dawn woke him up. He lit his fire again, cooked his breakfast, and was heading on again before the sun rose.

He was a man who traveled quickly. A man who traveled quickly even though he limped. He showed a deal of skill in copying that limp. He had it right off pat in no time, and after satisfying himself that this was so, he limped and didn't much bother about the limp. Yet once when he found it forgotten he stopped and cursed and told himself he would have to be more careful.

He carried a fairly heavy pack though he bore neither shovel nor pick. Both shovel and pick and a fair amount of other paraphernalia had vanished two days back with a bolting camel. And whither the camel was gone likewise had gone his supply of stores. So that the chance to avail himself of another man's grub had been as acceptable as the chance to avail himself of another man's gold.

The sun rose out of the bush ahead with almost the abruptness of a cannon ball issuing from a cannon. And like a cannon ball, red hot, it was. The wilderness drowsed and sulked and fevered under the downpour of heat. A fine, pearly mist appeared. The trees showed in ghostly pattern. Mosquitoes droned round Burton's face and neck. And toward noon the stifling heat had quieted all life there was in the bush.

All life save Burton's. He seemed tireless. If his ankle ached at all from the unusual movements imposed upon it, the ache did not trouble him. It was almost as if he had been limping thus for years and his muscles and sinews and nerves had become adapted to the lameness.

There was also in his eyes some of the driving force which his body seemed to contain. He had gray eyes as clear as a child's and as hard as steel. Through gazing much into sunshine and being puckered against the glare, they had changed shape from oval to narrow slits. Yet even so they showed plainly and unmistakably clear and hard. And though his beard concealed much of his face, you could vaguely make out the color under it, the mould and lines of a face belonging to a man who knew what he wanted and was ruthless in his manner of getting it.

NOON coming round found him still heading east. Nor did he halt for the midday snack. Some of the meat he had cooked for breakfast was left over, and he ate that as he walked, and for drink he drank quantities of cold tea likewise left over from the morning meal. And then, as he pushed on, he smoked.

The little puffs of smoke wafted past his cheek back over his shoulder. From under his boots little clouds of fine dust rose and hung in the still hot air. They didn't appear to settle again till he was fifteen or twenty yards ahead of them. And yet he was traveling no track pulverized by hoofs or boots or wheels. He was making his own trail, and the dust and sand were but the dust and sand that lay betwixt the trees and that encircled the butts of the trees.

He mounted a ridge, bare on the summit as a billiard table, and descended into a gully. Shiny pools dotted a waterway where water ran only in flood time. He passed by, pausing but to replenish his drinking supply, and headed up over another ridge. From the summit of this one he could see in the far distance a range of blue hills. Vaguely they showed through the pearly heat-mist and might have been anything from twenty to thirty miles away. Ahead of him stretched bush and more bush, interspersed with sandy stretches, and beyond was the railroad that was to take him south to Adelaide.

He did not dally on that summit. He was heading on again down the slope.

Tomorrow he would reach the railroad. "And once down in Adelaide," he told himself, "I'll be right. They won't look for me in the town."

The heat added up the longer the sun was in the sky. His eyes, puckered against the glare, burnt as the salty sweat worked into them. Sweat trickled down his face as it had trickled down Fletcher's face. His clothes grew wet and stuck to his body, and he drank more and more cold tea. And when the tea was gone he drank water.

That night there was rain. It came soon after he had lighted a fire to boil his billy and make fresh tea. He heaped more wood on the fire, armful after armful of it, and then sought round for bark to build a hut. There were no paperbark trees handy to make his task easy, and with an ax he carried in his pack he set to peeling bark off a giant whitegum. Then with saplings and this bark he made himself a shelter.

He heaped still more wood on the fire, and crawled under the shelter out of the rain. The shelter was right by the fire and on a bit of a rise so he would not be flooded out, and for a long time the fire kept him warm. But around midnight it went out. The rain was coming down in sheets now. It spurted and spluttered and rattled through the foliage of the trees. It was as if the floodgates of a dam had been opened. The dusty earth drank till it could drink no more, and then there was water rushing and hissing and gurgling in all directions. Burton's shelter became no shelter at all and he lay on his side, wet and shivering.

The cold would not have been so noticeable had it not come on top of a scorching day. It was the contrast that caused the shivers and the chattering teeth. But lying there in misery, Burton clutched the leather sack of gold and knew that he would be rewarded.

"Wait till I get to town," he told himself fiercely, "and I'll make up for this."

SOME time toward morning the rain stopped. Sunup found Burton on the track again. His trousers were wet, but they were drying on him as he walked. His blankets were wet, and they must remain wet and rolled till noon when, while he cooked his meal, they could lie spread out in the sun to dry. But his shirt he had taken off and spread along the top of his pack, and thus it was drying as the sun lifted higher. Half-naked and his body showing the red smears of mosquito bites he traveled with tireless stride.

He kept going till noon. Ere midday was scarce spent he was heading on again. Before the day was out he came in sight of the settlement and the railroad. He did not pause. Limping to perfection he headed in among the collection of iron-roofed buildings and sought the hotel.

One man nodded to him, and he nodded back. Another greeted him as Dawson, and asked what luck he'd had. He drank with a man at the hotel and showed him his gold and said his name was Dawson, and the man nodded and said he knew that by his limp. And if there had been at that moment a police trooper in the town he too must have been hoaxed.

"I'd like to try it on the police," Burton told himself. "Yet I reckon it's just as well they're away. You never can tell when an accident might happen."

The next day he paid for his passage south on the train. He walked from the hotel to the train, limping all the way. The man he had drunk with at the hotel shook hands with him and said good-by. And when the train was off and away to the southward, Burton felt there was nothing more to trouble him. All he had to do was to exchange the gold for money and have a good time.

When he left the train at Adelaide he felt like a prisoner who escapes beyond fear of capture. Methodically he sought out a quiet hotel. The next day he banked the gold, drew cash for it and set out to doll himself up. He had his beard shaved off, his hair cut, and bought a suit of clothes of a color almost that of mustard. Then he purchased a pair of silk socks and a pair of low-cut shoes. And then he bought a derby several sizes too small. Thus attired he thought he might pass as a city man.

Yet he had registered at his hotel as Dawson, and Dawson he still must be. For Dawson had come south with gold, and he was the man who had the gold. He had not been able to refrain from telling some three or four dozen people that already. Dawson, then, was his name, and Dawson limped.

He must not forget that limp. He remembered it now as he walked down King William Street, and he limped and dragged his toe at the beginning of each stride. And thus progressing he began to think of the gay time he would have that night. The austere life of the wild was behind him. There was with him a hunger for the fleshpots and the comforts and the hectic life of the town—the life that he would find in the town. He yearned for the gilded nights, the wine and the women and the song.

All at once he stopped. A hand on his shoulder had stopped him. He turned and found that the hand was that of a man in blue. The man in blue was regarding him with cold and uncertain eyes.

"Pity you couldn't have got rid of that limp, Dawson," he said. "If you could have got rid of that like you got rid of your beard, I mightn't have known you."

Burton met the policeman's gaze. "Yes, I'm Dawson all right," he agreed. "But what—"

"Oh, yes, you're Dawson all right," he was told. "There ain't another limp in the country like that one you've got. And being Dawson you're wanted for a little job you did a couple of months ago. If I'd been you, Dawson, I'd never have killed a black while I carried a brand like that limp."

"Killed a—killed—" Burton's jaw hung slack.

"Yes, it's no good arguing the point about it. You're Dawson and you done the job all right. So come on and take your licking."

SQUARE SHOOTERS

A Hard-Ridin', Western Novelette

By

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

CHAPTER I

SURPRISE PARTY

SHERIFF SAM WHITE was all agog and aflutter. He had just received a telephone call, a summons to duty, in the hinterlands. Usually when Sheriff Sam White received a call to duty, perched itself on its throne and told him perched itself on its throne and told him what to do. Eyes and mouth went a little hard. A buckling on of a gun belt, a hop to horse, and Sam White was ready for any emergency.

Not so now! He buckled on his gun belt all right, but his lean fingers fumbled a little. He did not immediately start for the stable to get his horse. On his way to the door he paused before a cracked mirror on the wall—hung there, it must be said in excuse for Sam, by Dover, Sam's deputy; and he rubbed his hand over a stubble of fair beard.

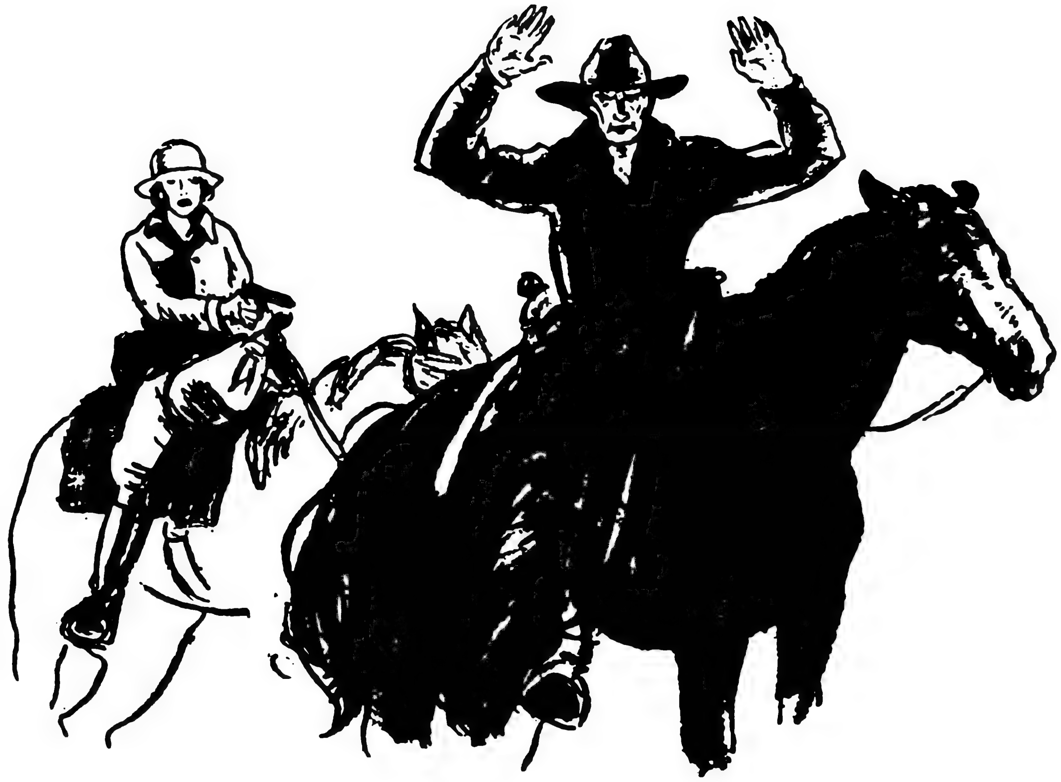
"Doggone it," he mused, "why didn't I shave? Wonder if I would have time now? Take me only a minute. But no! Mebbe minutes are precious little things."

As if he regretted the loss of that fraction of a minute during which he had paused before the mirror, he hastened to the stable, bridled and saddled his horse with fingers which no longer fumbled, hopped up, and was off down the village street in a cloud of dust.

Dover, the deputy, returning from the store after a purchase of tobacco, was in time to see the horse vanish in the gray cloud.

"Off again," mused Dover. "Hoggin' everything. Wouldn't let me in on that other matter. Won't let me in on this. I expect I will spend four-five days now, tellin' weary travelers that Sheriff Sam White is out of town, and I do not know when he will be back. Ho hum!"

"That other matter" to which the deputy referred had been rather sensational. Sam White had trailed a ramblin' robber and had got his man. In the course of getting him he had met Laura Merrill. He had been impressed by Laura Merrill. There had been no sentimental scene between them after their adventure, but Sam had thought a good deal about her since he had last seen her, three weeks before. He had said he would be ridin' over where she lived, beyond the hills, but he had not ridden over. There had been a press of



work, the monotonous detail of the office, and, besides, Sam had begun to wonder whether he had not been dreaming in vain. Good-lookin' girl like her prob'ly stirred emotions like his in every man she met. Doubtless she was bothered a good deal. Heaven knew, Sam White didn't want to bother her.

With no more originality than usual, he had told himself that you could have knocked him down with a feather when her voice had been wafted to him over the telephone. Her voice, he first noticed, hadn't had the quality it had had when he first met her. Then it had been a nice, even, controlled, sweet kind of a voice; now it was hurried, eager, had a sort of a note of authority in it.

She had said that she must see Sam White immediately. Could he ride over and meet her? Where was she now? Well, he ought to know that she had had to ride seven miles to get to a telephone. She was at a ranch house still farther away from Sam's village than her own home was, but she would be back there before he arrived. Yes, she would meet him there. Hurry, Mr. White, please!

Sam was hurrying now. He dashed by two men he knew very well and favored them with only a slight wave of his hand. He let his horse come to a walk only when the horse began to labor for its breath. As soon as it was breathing more easily, he sent it scampering on again. Presently he came to the high hills which were a natural barrier between his village and the lowlands beyond. Almost at once his horse started to climb, and in a few minutes he had to let him walk. The trail—it was no more—wound about the hills with abrupt liftings and descents.

At the highest point Sam could look down on the flats beyond him. He could see the house of old Lassiter, whom he knew, and beyond that, as he was aware, having been there once, was the home of Laura Merrill. Old Lassiter would be mad if Sam rode by his place without stopping—peppery old guy, Lassiter—but he would have to be mad. The voice which had come to him over the telephone, peremptory though it had been, was still calling to Sam White.

He made his way slowly down the last of the slope. At its bottom was a squat hill, a kind of sentinel mound standing guard a little beyond the other hills. Sam paid no attention to this. His eyes were fixed straight front. He was about to pick his horse up and send him scampering again, when that voice came to him once more.

Sam stopped his horse even as the horse lifted himself. The horse turned an enquiring eye in its master's direction, but Sam sat in the saddle as motionless as if he had been part of an equestrian statue carved out and left there on the trail.

He had missed a good deal in Laura Merrill's voice over the telephone; he missed a good deal more now. He wondered vaguely how he recognized the voice at all. It was almost as if it were the voice of another person.

"Stop, Sheriff White," Laura had called. "Don't move. Don't turn around!"

Sam didn't turn around. He couldn't turn around. He was paralyzed. Even his brain seemed to have ceased to function, so that he sat in dazed blankness.

"I'm coming up to you to take your gun," said Laura Merrill.

There was a faint little stir in Sam's brain at that. It was the stir of a vast astonishment. If she had said she was coming up to him to shoot him in the back, his astonishment could not have been greater. What, his numbed brain finally asked, did it all mean? Was he in his bed dreaming a queer dream? Surely this couldn't be real.

It was real enough. He heard Laura's horse behind him. Its nose was thrust past Sam. Still he couldn't see the girl. He felt her, though. She reached out and plucked his precious gun from its holster. Then there was the sound of her drawing her horse back a little.

"You may turn around now," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Still dazed but aware that he wanted to get a look at her, Sam turned his horse, turned him awkwardly for once in his life, with words ordinarily unnecessary and with a sawing at the bit like that of a veritable tenderfoot. The horse shook his head indignantly and accomplished the last of his turning in one sidewise leap. That little leap almost unseated a man who could ride a buckin' bronc with most of 'em.

Ordinarily that would have angered Sam, but he seemed to be past all anger. He was caught up now in a great bewilderment. At the door of his brain a hundred questions knocked, but he couldn't get the door open to let them in. They were a crowd out there, but within was only a vague whirling.

He came up in his saddle, however, when he caught sight of Laura Merrill's face. He was aware first that Laura had freckles. He had not noticed them when he had seen her before. Four, five, half a dozen little brown flecks stood out on her cheeks and three on her nose. He wondered about their distinctness briefly, and then he became aware that they were distinct because Laura was so pale. There was not a vestige of color in her face. And her eyes were so large! They stared at him; it was a round, intent, questioning stare.

SAM wondered instantly, as his brain snapped into action, why she looked so. Was it because of what she had done to him? She had held him up, for he saw that she had a gun in her right hand and his own in her left. Well, she must have a reason for that, a mighty strong reason. Sam was in love with her; he had fallen in love with her at first sight. He was the kind of man whose love breeds faith. Whatever her reason was, then, it was good enough for him.

"It's all right, Miss Merrill," he said gently. "Don't look like you had saw a ghost."

Her color returned to her face in a flood. Her lips quivered and her bosom rose and fell as she swiftly took her breath.

"I reckon you need my help," Sam said, with increasing gentleness. "You can have it. No matter what you need it for, you can have it. Just lemme have my gun back. You don't need a gun to get me to help you, ma'am."

She had perhaps ten seconds during which he thought she was going to yield. She even lifted the hand with his gun in it as if she were going to return the gun to him. But she let the hand fall before it was well up. She came erect in the saddle, and some of her color ebbed. All that remained of it was two bright patches under her cheek bones. Sam had once seen a man in fever look like that. Mebbe Miss Merrill was ill. Mebbe she was a little bit delirious. He wanted to voice that to her but he hadn't the nerve. It would be a terrible insult to her if he hinted that she wasn't quite herself, and she proved to be so.

She proved to be so immediately. Sam couldn't recall that he had ever been addressed by so matter-of-fact a voice. And the girl's eyes cooled. He saw that she had nerved herself for this ordeal, had been flustered by it, but was now her determined self again.

"Sorry to have held you up, Sheriff," she said crisply. "Had to do it. I had to have your help and I didn't know any other way to get it."

"Why, ma'am," said Sam, "you can have my help any time without holding me up. Why, I would do anything for you, ma'am. You can keep my gun if you think it the best way. S'pose you just tell me what is goin' on."

"First I must tell you that you will have to obey me, do exactly what I tell you to do," she said.

"I can think of harder jobs," he smiled.

"Don't laugh," she snapped. "Do you think I would have done what I have done if there were a joke in this? Be serious!"

"Yes, ma'am," Sam agreed, and his face was as sober as the proverbial judge's.

"That's better," she said. "Now I want you to say that I held you up, that I made you do whatever you do from now on. Say it!"

"Why, ma'am," Sam protested, "you don't have to *make* me do nothin'. I will do anything you ask me to do without any *makin'*."

"Say: She held me up at the point of a gun and took my own gun away from me. She kept me under her gun so that I couldn't help myself."

She raised her right hand now with her own gun in it. The gun was pointed straight at Sam White's heart. Sam shook his head and blinked his eyes. He'd wake up from this dream in a minute prob'ly. He recalled that he had sometimes dreamed and had known that he dreamed. That must be the explanation here. Meantime he might as well do as she said. He repeated what she had said.

"Will you promise me faithfully that if any questions are asked you will give that explanation and no other?" she asked.

"Why, I — I — Oh, yes, ma'am, I promise."

"Good enough. Now, I will tell you what has happened. When you were out here last you knew my brother had one man working for him, didn't you? Yes. Well, that fellow has got my brother into trouble." She looked at Sam a little more steadily than she had been looking, and her voice deepened somewhat. "That fellow, Edwards, tried to—to make love to me. He was civil enough about it at first, but when I only smiled, he threatened me. My brother, coming home unexpectedly, heard him. My brother drove him off the ranch after he had beaten him up. He told the man that if he ever came back on our place, he would kill him. That was merely the talk of anger."

"Why, sure," Sam said. "I know how that is. I would have said the same thing myself, and I might have killed him."

"Well," said Laura in a little more than a whisper, "that man Edwards lies dead, with a bullet in his body. He lies dead on our land at the edge of the hills. He came back on our land and he was killed. You are remembering what my brother said, aren't you?"

"Your brother wouldn't kill a man except in a fair fight," Sam said.

"You have never met him."

"But he is your brother," said Sam White, simply.

"Brothers and sisters differ as much as night and day," she declared. "No, you can't say my brother is innocent when you don't know anything about him."

"Is he innocent?" he asked.

"You see?" she cried. "You ask me that question already!"

He could have bitten out the tongue which had helped form the question. Doggone it, he was always, in crises, acting like a numbskull.

"I only meant, did he kill him in self-defense?" he asked.

"He didn't kill him at all," she said. "And you have got to prove that he didn't."

Sam White saw the situation in a blaze of understanding. He understood why the girl had held him up and was going to force him to do her bidding. He was the sheriff. A sheriff didn't get a report of a murder and jump to the conclusion that a man who had threatened another man was innocent. He went after that threatening man. He nailed him if there was a shred of evidence against him. Laura had undoubtedly thought that all out. She knew, probably, that Sam White had a reputation for being unflagging in the pursuit of his duty. By gosh, he had to admit, she was a clever and a courageous young woman.

"You have evidence that your brother ain't guilty, ma'am?" he asked quietly.

"I haven't," she replied. "In fact, all the evidence is against him."

They sat looking at each other in silence for a while. Sam White as sheriff, considered what his chances would be if he spurred his horse forward and attempted to take the guns from her. Sam White as a man, decided he would attempt no such thing. He was in a jam. He would take his time. But he could not now or ever lay violent hands on Laura Merrill. Dared he, then, disobey her? Would she shoot him? Well, she was a smart girl. He had a feeling that she was reading his thoughts now. On the other hand he couldn't read her thoughts, except that he knew she was going to save her brother at any cost. She had proved that by holding him up. Of course putting a bullet into a sheriff would make the cost pretty high, but maybe all costs looked alike to her. Certainly she had a hard, determined look in her eyes now.

"I'm not going to let you arrest my brother," she said. "I am going to make you help him. You had better understand that. I—I am prepared to do something desperate, otherwise."

"S'pose, ma'am" said Sam White in his gentlest tone, "that you tell me about it."

CHAPTER II

CIRCUMSTANCES

"FIRST, let me tell you about my brother and me," Laura said. "Our parents died when we were both young. My brother had taken care of me ever since. He had made sacrifices for me. We came out here so that he could make a home for both of us. He has worked hard here, getting started, and so have I, for that matter.

"This man who has been killed drifted in here one day. Perhaps you don't know how hard it is to keep a man 'way over here. Nowadays it seems the men, most of them anyhow, want to work where they can get to town. This man seemed to be very capable, and he promised to stay on. He said he wanted to save some money, so that the location rather pleased him than otherwise.

"For the first few weeks he was a model. He did nothing but attend to his work. Then I began to feel a difference in him. I think it was his way of looking at me; I would catch him at it. He appeared as if he were trying to puzzle out something. He didn't seem to get anywhere.

"Then he came up to the house in the middle of the afternoon one day when he must have known that my brother was not at home. Without any preliminaries he said he and I were going for a ride. I only laughed. It is so lonely out here that I always have a gun handy. He started for me with his hands outstretched. I pulled the gun and he fell back. He revealed himself then. He was not a bad-looking man in a thin, dark way; but now all of a sudden he was very repulsive. He drew his thin lips away from his teeth, and he made me think of a wolf or something.

" 'Think you're too good to go for a ride with me, eh?' he asked.

" 'No', I answered. 'Only I don't know you. You had better get back to your work.'

" 'You go ridin' with me or I'm through here,' he declared.

" 'You're through anyhow,' I told him.

" 'Well, I'll be leavin', he said, and he started for the door.

"I told him to stop where he was. He turned about rather surprised. I said he couldn't leave till my brother returned. I made him sit down. Several times he acted as if he were going to try to spring at me to get the gun away from me, but each time he thought better of it. He was still sitting there when my brother came home.

"I told my brother what had happened. He beckoned the man outside. They had a terrific fight. That fellow had courage of a sort, and for a while it was nip and tuck between him and my brother. My brother finally knocked him down, and he didn't get up for ten minutes at least. Then my brother told him to get his horse and ride off and not come back.

"That was the last I saw of him. This morning early one of Lassiter's men came riding up to the house in a hurry. He threw himself down and rushed up to the door. My brother opened it, and since I had seen the man through the window, I went up behind my brother. The man said he had found Edwards' dead body over at the edge of the hills."

"Now, ma'am," White interrupted, "let's digest this as far as we have gone. We don't want to take in too much all at once. Leastways I don't. The old brain can handle just so much at a time. If there's too much she kinda clogs. Who was this man who come ridin' up in such a hurry?"

"His name is Williams," she answered. "He works for Lassiter, as I said."

"Williams?" he repeated. "I don't seem to recall him. Has he been with Lassiter long?"

"As long as we have been here."

"What sort of fellow?"

"Why, a man about thirty-five, I should say. I don't know anything about his work, but he certainly can ride a horse."

"Oh, most men can do that," White said. "By the way have you seen Lassiter this mornin'?"

"Not yet. Williams said he would go and tell him."

"Did Williams tell you how he happened to find the body?"

"No; he just said he was ridin' and he ran on it."

The sheriff looked past the girl across the flat. He wasn't much of a detective. When it came to action, he was there; but sifting things down to where only the important remained was not so easy for him.

"Let Williams rest for a minute," he said. "Tell me about your brother."

"I'd better tell you the exact truth, hadn't I?" she asked.

"You wouldn't tell nothin' else, ma'am," Sam said loyally.

"I might—to save my brother," she declared.

"Well," he excused her, "that'd be different."

She had to smile at that, a little wanly; but Sam White thought a warmer glow came into her eyes.

"My brother didn't get home last night till long after dark," she said. "His clothing was muddy. He said that a cow had got bogged down in the marsh and he had been getting it out. He said it was a hard job. It took him quite a while."

"He was muddy?" Sam asked.

"Yes, there was mud all over his clothing. He spent an hour after supper cleaning it."

"He had a gun on him?"

"Why, yes. When he rides far, he takes a gun with him."

"Perfectly natural," Sam agreed. "Now, let's get back to this fella Williams. When you looked at him, over your brother's shoulder, just what was he like?"

"Why, he was out of breath as if he had been running. He said he had been riding along the edge of the hills. He had come to a waterfall and had dismounted to get a drink.

"The waterfall, as I happen to know and as he said, drops down in a depression in the hills, a sort of cave. I suppose the stream has been running there for years and years and has cut back the hill. Anyhow when you kneel by the pool, as I have frequently done, you are in the shadow of an overhang. It is always twilight there till about sunset. Then the sunlight strikes in. This morning when Williams knelt to get his drink, it would be at its daytime darkest.

"Williams said he went to his knees, took off his hat, and put down his hands to bend to the pool. He said he put his right hand on something that he knew to be a body. He whirled toward that hand and found that it was resting on a man's chest. He said he must have knelt there for a full minute before he took the hand away. He said he was stunned. He had been within a few inches of the body when he had knelt, but because of the gloom he hadn't seen it."

"And Edwards had been shot?"

"Yes; Williams said that he examined the body after he had got over his shock and his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. He said the bullet entered the chest just over the heart."

"Did he say how the body was lyin'."

"That was strange," Laura answered. "He said that it was stretched out and the hands had been laid alongside it. It was—was—well, orderly, as Williams described it."

"It wasn't in the position it would have been in if Edwards had crumpled down from a shot," said White.

"That's it, exactly."

"Did Williams find any bloodstains?"

"Only a great dried stain on the shirt over the chest."

"Why, then," said Sam, "Edwards wasn't killed where Williams found his body. The body was taken there by whoever killed him and hidden away in the darkness."

"That's what it looks like," she agreed.

SAM had to mull that over for a while. Then he looked squarely at the girl. "Had your brother seen Edwards after he had that scrap with him at your place?" he asked.

"There!" said Laura spiritedly. "You can understand now why I held you up. Your suspicion is already turned toward my brother."

"Oh, no, ma'am," Sam declared earnestly. "I am just tryin' to get all the details of this thing straight. I am not suspicionin' anybody. Why, my mind is as open as that sky up there."

"I asked my brother if he had seen Edwards and he said he had not," she answered him.

"You believe him?"

"Why, of course I believe him. He wouldn't lie. He isn't that kind of man."

"No man goes through his whole life without tellin' a lie now and then," the sheriff said. "Well, let's get on with Williams. How long was he out of breath, and when he got his breath back, how did he act?"

"You're suspecting Williams now," she declared. "He didn't do it, I'm sure. I believe he is a man that can be trusted. He impressed me that way."

"I ain't suspicionin' him either," Sam said with a touch of impatience. "My good gosh, ma'am, I have got to take everybody into consideration. Will you answer them questions?"

"Certainly. He was out of breath for perhaps a minute. He stood drawing his breath deeply into his lungs for about that long. Then he took one last, long breath, and he seemed to become normal."

"Was he pale? Did he show any signs of excitement?"

"No; when he began to breathe normally he was as calm as you are now."

"Did he hurry on with his story, as if he wanted to get it all out of him and have done with it?"

"He didn't. I was there, remember. My brother asked him questions, and before he answered each one he looked beyond my brother at me. He was sort of apologetic, as if he were sorry that I had to hear what he said. He had taken off his hat and he stood with it in his hand all the time he talked."

Sam White remembered that his own hat was still on his head. He hadn't removed it at any time. There had been too much going on to permit him to think of a hat. He couldn't remove it now and sit uncovered before the girl. No doggoned puncher was going to teach him manners. Nevertheless he wished he had taken it off. She seemed to have an eye for little niceties.

"Did this here Williams have any mud on him?" he asked.

"There is an overflow from that pool," she said. "The water seeps far out into the sand in the night. In the daytime it dries up. Yes, Williams had some mud on him. The soil is thicker close to the pool, almost like clay. You will remember that Williams knelt in it and necessarily moved in it when he examined the body."

"You holdin' a brief for this fella Williams, ma'am?" Sam White asked a little coldly, for he could not repress the tiny flare of jealousy that ran through him.

"I am not! I am holding a brief, as you call it, for my brother only."

"How well do you know Williams?"

"Why, I have seen him just once before in my life. He rode up to the house one morning, looking for my brother. He had a message from Lassiter."

"Your brother wasn't home, and you and Williams talked some?"

In spite of the trouble she was facing, Laura smiled and her eyes twinkled.

"Williams was very pleasant and respectful, she said. "We talked of this and that for perhaps ten minutes."

"It must have been a long message!"

"The delivery of the message took perhaps fifteen seconds."

"You had quite a few seconds left then," he said, nettled. "Well, ma'am, can I call your attention to the fact that you are holdin' up a sheriff, not much of a sheriff but a sheriff none the less. You are interferin' with an officer in the performance of his duty."

"No," she declared, "I'm not! I'm aiding an officer in the performance of his duty."

"I don't get that."

"Why, I *know* my brother is innocent. You don't. You have the authority. I have the knowledge. We will have to work together."

"You mean you will tell me just what to do?"

"Well, maybe something like that."

"I ask you, ma'am to put up your gun

nd return mine to me," the sheriff said. Then I will go about my business."

"Look here," she returned. "Circumtances point to my brother's having killed Edwards. He had a fight with Edwards. He returned home late with mud on his clothing. Mr. White, it—it was the same kind of mud as there is at that pool, a kind of yellowish gray. I have been pretty well over this country, and I don't know of mud anywhere just like that. Even at the other waterfalls the mud is different. Oh, don't you see how I am trusting you?"

SUDDENLY her lovely eyes were full of tears. Sheriff Sam White felt a good deal as he would have felt if some one had suddenly rained blows into his face.

"Ma'am, ma'am," he entreated, "don't do that. Please don't! It—it tears the heart out of me. There! I've told you how I feel. Can't you trust me?"

"I—I do trust you."

"Gimme back my gun, then, and lemme get on this job. We are losin' time. Never let a trail get cold."

"I can't give you back your gun. I must make you do what I say."

"What is that?"

"I don't know. But you must let me go with you. If we meet anyone you must bear in mind that I have a gun on you. You mustn't do anything that I don't approve of. Here, we will arrange it this way. If anyone asks you anything, you will look at me. If you are to say yes, I will nod. If no, I will shake my head. A little nod, a little shake, will be sufficient. Will you promise that?"

"In the law, ma'am," Sam said, "a promise given under what they call duress ain't no promise a-tall."

"A promise given by Sheriff White is a promise," she said.

"Well, I expect I got to promise you then," Sam said.

"Will your promise hold if I give you back your gun?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave the gun to him. He dropped it into its holster.

"Now, ma'am," he said, "we will go along over to your house. Is your brother there—now?"

"He may be. He rode off to the pool after Williams left."

THEY rode across the flat toward Lassiter's in silence. When they were abreast of Lassiter's house, they saw two men riding toward them over the flat behind the house. The men apparently caught sight of them, for one of them began to wave his arms excitedly.

"That's Lassiter," White said. "We will have to lose a minute by waiting for him. He will have to have the story at first hand, from you? Make it snappy, please, ma'am."

Lassiter dashed up to them, and the other man followed him.

"That Williams?" White asked.

"Yes," she answered.

There was an interval of perhaps thirty seconds between the arrival of Lassiter and the arrival of Williams. White waved his hand toward the girl as Lassiter stopped.

"She'll tell you," the sheriff said.

As Lassiter turned to the girl, Sam pulled back his horse and turned his head a little so that he could watch the arriving Williams out of the corner of his eye. There was nothing about this puncher to arouse a man's suspicions, the sheriff saw. He was a fair-haired fellow of the thirty-five or so of which Laura had spoken. He had a cool, keen blue eye, and even now, though anxiety touched it, his face was pleasant.

He nodded to White and then his eyes went swiftly, though a little furtively, to Laura. Slowly Laura turned her own eyes from Lassiter's face, so that their gaze encountered Williams'. Sam White started. If ever there had been entreaty in a girl's eyes, it was in Laura Merrill's eyes now. Something lay between her and Williams, White was sure. What was it? Did it explain her high-handed proceeding in holding him up and exacting a promise from him?

Williams had found Edwards' body. Williams doubtless had no reason for killing Edwards. There was nothing about him which suggested the killer. On the other hand Merrill had had one scrap with Edwards. Some of these ramblers were revengeful. Edwards would not forget that beating. Well, then, did Williams know that Merrill had done the killing, and was that what Laura's supplicating look had meant. There was something queer here, something alien to Laura Merrill.

Her story done, Laura turned to White.

"Shall we go on?" she asked.

White nodded. They set their horses toward the Merrill ranch.

"Looka here, Sam," Lassiter said, "they's one thing you got to get straight in that head o' yours. Merrill didn't kill this Edwards. I know Merrill. He ain't no killer. You agree with me?"

"It never makes no difference in your opinions whether anybody agrees with you or not," White retorted.

"Some men don't have no opinions at all," Lassiter asserted. "I'm servin' notice, h'ever, that no harm comes to Merrill in this thing. He is too good a man. I *know* him, I'm tellin' you."

"Do you know who did kill Edwards?" Sam asked.

"I don't. If I did, I would have him caught by now."

"Don't shoot off your mouth so much then," Sam ordered, in a voice too low for Laura to hear.

"Sheriffs ain't never been none too welcome over in this panhandle of ours," Lassiter said. "Me, I been here many years, and I ain't never needed a sheriff yet."

"And you're almost too old now to need anything," Sam returned.

"We'll see 'bout that. Mebbe the old man will shine like a star in this thing."

"Lassiter, you butt in on me and I will break you in two," White threatened.

"Two pieces of me would make two good men, compared to some," said Lassiter.

CHAPTER III

WHERE'D HE BEEN?

THEY found Merrill at his ranch. He came out of the house as they rode up, and he invited them inside. Sam took a good look at him as they sat down in the kitchen. He was a man of about thirty, lean, tall, with cool, dark eyes, and a skin bronzed by his having spent about all his waking life out of doors.

"You're the sheriff, are you?" Merrill asked.

It was the first question that had been put to Sam in the girl's presence, and he had to check a smile as he turned to her for the nod which she had promised. She would not look at him, however, and he saw that he could not make a joke out of her instructions.

"I'm the sheriff," Sam answered.

"You are here to investigate the killin' of Edwards, of course. Well, anything you want to ask me?"

"A sheriff has got to ask questions sometimes that may look as if he was stirrin' up trouble," said Sam. "I don't mean to insult you, Merrill. You had a scrap with this Edwards, though."

"I did. I beat him up, an' I would do it again."

"So would any man. But we got to take that scrap into consideration. You worked with this man Edwards. What for kind of fella did you find him to be?"

"Why, he was always pleasant enough—till one day. Good worker and capable."

White looked at the floor as if he were lost in thought. In reality he could see Merrill's boots. Those boots had been wet. The uppers had dried, but Sam knew that they had recently been washed. The edges of the soles still had a dark look as of dampness. Merrill might have washed his boots here at the house, but the sheriff thought not. Then where had he washed them? At one of the numerous waterfalls in the hills would be a good place. That waterfall beside which the body of Edwards had been found would be a particularly good place. If a man visited that pool, he would get mud on his boots.

"Will you lemme see your gun?" Sam asked.

"Sure."

As Merrill rose and went into another room, Sam's eyes wandered idly about this room. They came to rest on a hat hanging from a nail. The sheriff gave no start, because he saw just what he had expected to see. At three places on the crown of the hat, there were stains which made spots darker than the hat's fabric. Water, White was sure, had recently been carried in that hat.

He could form a mental picture out of that. Merrill had been at the pool. He had got mud on his boots. He had carried water in his hat out into the open, to wash that mud off the boots. The sheriff held that in abeyance. Merrill came back with a gun and handed it to White. White examined it. He looked into Merrill's eyes when he returned the gun.

"Looks like two shots had recently been fired from that gun," White said.

"Last night," Merrill confirmed this. "I had a cow bogged down. Mebbe my sister told you. I tried to scare her by firing twice at her. I thought she would flounder out. She wouldn't. I had to rope her and drag her out."

"Where was that?" Sam asked idly.

"About three miles over here, along the hills. There is a marsh there."

"I don't know this country so much," Sam said, "but them marshes generally dry up at this time of year."

"This one doesn't," Merrill stated. "There must be underground springs there or something. I haven't investigated, but that marsh don't show no signs of dryin' up. You can have a look at it your own self. I'll take you there. I'll show you where I worked along the edge of it."

"All right," Sam said.

"You got any clews?" Merrill asked.

Sam looked at Laura again. She returned his look now, but she did not nod or shake her head. She seemed content to allow him to answer simple questions unaided.

"I'm goin' to shoot you one more question," the sheriff said, sitting up in his chair. "Where you been this mornin'?"

"Why," said Merrill, "I been over to that pool, lookin' around."

"Makin' your tracks over there?"

"I expect I made some tracks there?"

"Merrill," said White sharply, "from what Lassiter has told me, you been in the cattle business all your life. You must have been in some jams or on the edge of them. You're a grown man. Don't you know no better than to go to the scene of a crime and make fresh tracks. A man tryin' to get a clew there has not only fresh tracks to consider, but some of the old tracks have been wiped out. Do you think that was the right thing to do?"

"Why, I didn't think of the right of it or the wrong of it," Merrill declared. "I just wanted to have a look. I was huntin' for some kind of a sign."

"An' what did you find?"

"I found the tracks of Williams' boots. Williams found the body, you know. When Williams was here this mornin', I told him I was goin' to ride over there, and I asked him to lemme look at his boots, so I would know which tracks was his. I could tell. 'Twas no hard matter."

"What other signs did you pick up?"

"I picked up a sign that Edwards himself had made."

"Edwards himself?"

"Yes; it was plain enough. Edwards wasn't carried in beside that pool. He walked in."

"Well, we will go over there and have a look," the sheriff said.

They all rose, including Laura Merrill. Sam looked at Merrill.

"This ain't no nice job," White said. "There ain't no reason why your sister should go."

"Better stay at home, Laura," Merrill suggested.

Laura gave Sam a look which said plainly that she didn't appreciate that suggestion made on top of a suggestion from Sam himself.

"The sheriff knows I want to go over there," she said. "I'm going."

On the way Sam managed to work his horse alongside hers.

"You know I was just thinking of you when I said that," he told her. I on'y—on'y—"

"If you on'y, it's perfectly all right," she said. "On'y please remember your promise."

"I will, ma'am."

WHEN they reached the pool, Sam ordered all of them to remain on their horses and to keep back from the damp ground.

"That includes me, does it?" Laura asked icily.

"Why, ma'am," Sam said, "Edwards is still in there, you know. It ain't no place for you."

Her coldness was like an actual icy blast to him. On a former occasion he had thought she and he were going to be at least good friends. Now she was trying to freeze him. The sheriff's face was rather grim as he went in beside the pool. It was grimmer as he looked about him.

Edwards' body apparently had not been moved. It lay close up to the rock, covered now with a blanket, which, White supposed, Merrill had brought with him.

All about the pool were fresh tracks, Merrill's tracks. Merrill had certainly moved about a lot, unnecessarily, it seemed to the sheriff. If that were so, he must have had an object, and that object must have been to obliterate the former tracks.

White's heart sank. Nobody but a guilty man would have done this thing. Then Merrill must have killed Edwards. True, Edwards might have lain in wait for him, to get revenge for that former beating. It might have been a matter of self-defense on Merrill's part. But he seemed not to be game to face whatever there was to face. That was doubtless on account of his sister. If those two men had been alone when Edwards was killed, Merrill might have a hard time to prove that he had acted in self-defense. There was that former quarrel between the two men.

While this was running through his mind, Sam had been scanning the earth. He was squatted down, so that when he lit a match, the tracks were under his eyes. The tracks which Merrill had made he easily pictured in his mind. Merrill, White had seen, had recently bought a new pair of boots. The high heels made a clean cut in the damp earth. Williams' boots were older. The tracks they made were wider and blunter.

White's scrutiny brought him close up to Edwards' body. He lighted a fresh match and ran it alongside the blanket. Suddenly he started and bent low.

There in the soft earth were the prints of Merrill's heels. Beside these were the prints of another pair of heels, not Merrill's or Williams'. Lighting still another match, Sam examined the dead man's boots. They had made the second pair of prints.

Sam went back to the prints and examined them more closely. He saw that the half soles of the boots which he knew were Merrill's had been pressed into the earth. The prints of the heels were also deeper.

Sam White stood up and wiped sudden trickles of sweat from his cheeks. He saw what had happened. Edwards had indeed walked in here. He had walked in here, but he had been assisted. The man who had assisted him was Merrill. Edwards had stood here for a moment and then Merrill had let him down to the ground. Doing so, Merrill had come up on the balls of his feet. Standing erect, when Edwards lay on the ground, Merrill had come back sharply on his heels. That accounted for these deeper prints. White could imagine that it was just at that moment of movement on Merrill's part that Edwards had died.

Why had Edwards been brought here? Water! That was the answer. The man who had shot him had not wanted to kill him. He had rushed to his aid and had piloted him to the pool. Edwards was more badly hurt than the man had thought. He had died almost at once. Then he had been shot not far away. Whoever had assisted him must have staunched the flow of his blood. Where was the thing with which that flow had been staunched? In what place had Edwards been shot? Those were things which White had to discover.

Meantime the situation didn't look good for Merrill. All this secrecy had a sinister appearance. It didn't seem now as if Merrill had shot in self-defense. Was it possible that he and Edwards had had a further argument after their fight at Merrill's place, and that Merrill had taken Edwards at a disadvantage later and put a bullet into him? If not, why had Merrill lied? That was what robbed the sheriff of any confidence he might have had in Merrill. A brave man stood up and took his medicine. Another kind of man—well, another kind of man acted about as Merrill had acted.

And there was Williams. Williams had found the body. So far as White could determine, he was the only person who had been about the pool besides Merrill. Williams had said he had come upon the body in the morning following the murder. Why hadn't Williams examined the signs? Or if he had examined them, why hadn't he told White what he had found. Was he in love with Laura?

It was a mixed-up mess, Sheriff White had to admit. The thing that, in the end, came to stand out was that Merrill was Laura's sister, and Sam would do anything in the world for that girl. That is, he would do anything in the world for her except betray the official trust that had been placed in him.

It was an old dilemma, but for Sam it was as new as if no man had ever faced it before. He stood for a while till he had fully collected himself, and then he went out to the waiting group. They scanned his face, but he was sure they gathered nothing from it.

CHAPTER IV

SAM RIDES

SAM looked directly at Williams. Williams returned the look steadily.

"Williams," White said, "do you know who killed Edwards?"

"Do I know who killed Edwards?" Williams repeated. "Gosh, man, if I knowed ho killed Edwards I wouldn't be here. would be ridin' after him, an' I would ep on ridin' till I found him if it took e a year an' a half."

"Did you kill Edwards your own self?"

The eyes of the two men clashed hard. hey were both rugged men, and there was o wavering in the glance of either.

"You tryin' to insult me?" Williams sked at last.

"I'm askin' you a straight-out question n' it deserves a straight-out answer. Did ou kill Edwards?"

Williams' eyes shot across to Laura. She aled a little under his gaze, but that was he only sign she gave.

"If you think I killed him, you got the ower to arrest me," Williams said.

"You refuse to answer."

"And," said Williams, "you ain't got he power to make me answer that question."

White said no more. He thought he nderstood perfectly why Williams refused o answer. He knew that Merrill had one the killing. He was afraid that if he aid he had not killed Edwards himself, White would ask him if Merrill had done t. He was willing to let White suspect im if necessary. Why was that? Why, ecause he loved Laura Merrill. Plain as y!

White turned to Lassiter.

"I have no power to make you answer ything, Lassiter," he said coldly, "but eretofore you have been willin' to answer ost anything."

"If you're hintin' that I killed that man, ou are wastin' some perfectly good hints," assiter said. "I'll answer any question ou can shoot."

"Where did you send Williams this ornin'?"

"Uh?" said Lassiter.

"You heard what I said. Come on, assiter. Gimme an answer. You said ou would."

Lassiter was not a specially quick inker. He did not seem to be able to asp the significance of this question. He ed to decide, from White's manner, t it was important, but for the present e could not get beyond that. His gaze t helplessly to Merrill and then to a.

"Why," up spoke Williams, "I'll tell —"

"You just keep out of this," White ordered sternly. "You had your chance to answer. Let Lassiter have his chance."

"I—"

Sam whipped out his gun and held it toward Williams, loosely.

"Hold your tongue, Williams," White said.

Williams held his tongue, but he moved a step toward Lassiter, as if by his mere presence he was going to communicate something to the older man.

"Keep back," White ordered, again. "Williams, if you monkey with me in the performance of my duty, I'll have to tumble you over. I mean it!"

Williams stepped back. Lassiter had got no help from the eyes of Laura or her brother. He turned now to White, with an increase in his air of helplessness.

"Why," he said, "I didn't send Williams no place this mornin'. I reckon he just rode off by himself."

"And, Williams," said White softly, "you rode directly to this pool and found Edwards' body."

"Anybody comin' this way generally stops for a drink," Williams returned. "It's good water."

Well, his nerve wasn't shaken anyhow. White now directed his attention to Merrill.

"Merrill," he said, "I've got to place you and Williams in the custody of Lassiter. Got any objection to that?"

"None!"

"You, Williams?"

"Not me! I been in Lassiter's custody for some time now. I been workin' for him."

"Lassiter," White told the old man, "you will be responsible for these two men. Get that?"

"Easy responsibility," said Lassiter. "They won't run away. You think one of them killed Edwards? If so, you are off your nut. They ain't that kind."

"I'll be back here toward evening to get them," White said.

He turned his horse and started off. Laura cut in toward him and ranged up alongside him. He stopped his horse.

"Why, Mr. White," she said, "you are not going without telling me what you have found, are you?"

"I can't talk just now," White said gently.

"Do you suspect my brother?" she asked.

"My mind is still wide open, Miss Merrill."

"Where are you going now?"

"Over to the nearest village."

"Will you take me with you?"

"No, ma'am. Ride is too far. Sun is too hot."

"Very well!"

Sam rode away. For the first time since he had met her he gladly left Laura Merrill. He could not bear her questioning eyes.

It was toward one o'clock when he rode into the village toward which he had headed. His backward glances had showed that he had not been followed. He had had a notion that old Lassiter might forsake his trust and follow him, or that Laura might do so. Apparently they were willing for the time being to let him go.

THIS village was made up of the usual postoffice, general store, poolroom, and cluster of houses. Sam headed for the poolroom. He was out of his own bailiwick now. He had no authority, but on the other hand no one knew him here.

One man was idly knocking pool balls over the table, and another man was behind the cigar counter. No one else was in the room. Sam bought a package of cigarettes.

"I was goin' to meet two-three men here to-day," he said, then. "Man named Lassiter. Seen him?"

"Ain't. He don't get over here so often."

" 'Nother man named Edwards, third named Williams."

Apparently this man had not heard about the killing.

"Them two come in once in a while, separate," he said. "Haven't seen 'em in quite a spell."

"I'm a friend of theirs," Sam said. "They been havin' a little fuss. I'm tryin' to iron it out."

"Thass right," the man said. "They had a fuss in here one night. Had everybody duckin' for a while."

" 'Bout a girl?"

"It wasn't 'bout nothin', far as I could make out. Edwards was here, and Williams come in. Edwards was just lightin' a cigarette at the lighter there. When he turned around, Williams was in the doorway, glarin' at him. Neither of them said nothin' for a minute. Don't think either of 'em had a gun on 'em. Lucky, I reckon.

"Then Williams walked up to Edwards and took hold of his arm. He is a bigger man than Edwards, and he had the edge that way. He bent his face down to Edwards, and he sure spoke words for a minute or two. Then he straightened up and made for the door.

"I had moved back, but I come up now. Edwards was mad clean through. His eyes was blazin', and his lips was workin' around his cigarette.

" 'Fella,' he said in a kind of a whisper, 'when you got anything more to say to me, you say it with a gun on you.' "

"Williams only nodded and went out. Has them two guys got together?"

"Not that I know of," White replied. "You didn't catch a word that Williams said?"

"Not a word."

"It kinda looked like Williams had been huntin' Edwards, didn't it?"

"Sure did."

White left. He went to the store and got himself and his horse food and water. At three o'clock he started back for Merrill's ranch, but he did not return by the way by which he had come. When he was well out in the flat, he turned north till he came to the hills. Passing through these, he followed them till he thought he was about at the spot at which the pool was. He found a break in the hills and entered it. Before he emerged on the other side, he stopped his horse and listened intently. There was no sound on the still air. The sun was dipping to the west now, and the only change that White could discover was a hint of the coming coolness of the twilight.

He rode out on the flat and saw that he was near the pool. His eyes swept the flat in the direction of the Merrill ranch, but there was no horseman on it. White dismounted and dragged the reins over the horse's head.

Then he began a minute examination of the sand in every direction from the pool. The sun had set and the twilight was thickening when he came upon what he had been looking for.

This was a stain no bigger than the palm of his hand. It was on a flat outcropping of shale and it was not distinct, but White was sure that it was a bloodstain. He bent and looked at it closely.

The sand came up around the edge of the rock. Sam understood that the stain had been on the sand also but that the sand had been stirred up so that the stain had disappeared. This was borne out by the fact that there were minute particles of sand clinging to the rock. It had a polished look over the stain and at the edges of it. Of course the sand might have been blown over the rock, but Sam was sure that it had been used in an attempt to scour the stain away. Also the scouring must have been done after the blood had dried. The stain was not smeared. It was only indistinct. That would be natural, for with a dying man on his hands the slayer would attend to him first if he were going to attend to him at all. Then he would return and attempt to remove this evidence of crime. He had probably thought that no one would find that fragment of stain. White certainly would not have found it if he had not searched for it so carefully.

Well, it didn't help him much, except that it bore out his theory that Edwards had been shot here and not at the pool, and that he had been assisted to the pool. He had been assisted by Merrill, too. All that was plain enough now. Where, then, was whatever had been used to staunch the flow of blood. That was far more important than the stain. For an hour in the failing light the sheriff searched, but his search was not rewarded. It occurred to him then that the garment, if it had been a garment, might have been thrown back in the shadows about the pool. That did not seem likely, but the slayer must have felt some panic, especially if he had killed a man when he did not mean to do so, and he might have cast the garment back there, thinking it would not even be hunted for.

SAM walked rapidly toward the pool, fumbling for matches. The darkness was much thicker in the cave, almost like that of night, and he struck a match and held it aloft.

He found that Laura Merrill was standing directly in front of him. Again her gun was leveled at him. The girl stood perfectly motionless, and before the light of the match died, White saw that there was a hard, determined look on her face. He perceived what had happened. She had known that he would return here, and she had eluded the others and had returned, herself.

"Step back, Mr. White," she said coldly. "I want to talk to you outside."

Sam stepped back. This was a new Laura Merrill, a somber, proud, defiant young woman. The last time he had met her she had been full of fun, a graceful, happy girl. Now she was meeting an emergency with a show of iron that must have been in her all along. Sam White loved her, and now admiration for her flamed up in him.

"I want to know just what you have found out, Sheriff," she said. "Tell me!"

"First will you answer a question or two?" he asked. "Not important questions, ma'am. But I'd like to clear away the muck before we get down to hard pan."

"What is it?" she asked.

"First, where are Lassiter and your brother and Williams?"

"At our house."

"Miss Merrill," said Sam slowly, "what became of Edwards' horse last night?"

"It came in, in the night, riderless."

"You are sure about that?"

"I am sure. It was there this morning when I got up, early."

"You got up earlier than usual?"

"I didn't. I always get up about five. It was five minutes to five this morning. Are you beginning to suspect me, Mr. Sheriff?"

"No, ma'am! Any feelin' I have for you ain't a feelin' of suspicion. Ma'am, there's one thing more: What was your brother wearin' when he left the house yesterday mornin'?"

"Why, his usual clothing."

"Did he wear a vest?"

"Yes, he always wore a vest."

"Was it the same vest he was wearin' to-day? That vest he was wearin' to-day looked like it hadn't been wore out in the weather much."

"I—I didn't notice," said Laura Merrill. "What do you mean?"

"This was a blue vest," Sam said. "It looked like it went with a blue suit, the kind of a suit a man would keep for best. Your brother hasn't got a whole lot of clothes, has he, ma'am?"

"He has a blue suit."

"But he hasn't been wearin' that blue vest for every day."

Laura suddenly laid a hand on the sheriff's arm. The hand was a little unsteady, he could feel, and his own arm trembled under her touch.

"Sheriff White," she pleaded, "please tell me what you have discovered about my brother. I—he—he is all I have in the world. I can't let any harm come to him."

"Laura," said White, "you have had an idea all along that your brother killed Edwards, haven't you? Him and Edwards got into some kind of a jam, and your brother put a bullet into him. Oh, excuse me, ma'am, I don't mean to be brutal, but I'm the sheriff, you know. I got my job that the people give me. They expect me to do my duty, no matter who is hurt. But I am your friend, Laura. I am! I will do anything I can for you. Tell me, how did your brother act when he come in last night? Was he excited. Try to remember about his clothing. Was he wearin' his vest? It's important, ma'am. Tell me everything you can, and then let me help you."

Slowly the girl straightened up. She backed away, still keeping the gun on him. She was all determination now.

"I have nothing to tell you," she said.

"Why?"

"Because," she answered with a hard smile, "you are the sheriff. Also from now on you are my prisoner. I mean that, Sheriff White. I will shoot you if I have to, to make you do what I say. Can't you see that I am desperate? I had you once and I freed you. I freed you so that you would think you were not being hampered. I knew I could get you again. What have you found out? Tell me everything."

CHAPTER V

THE FREE HAND

NIGHT had fallen fully now, and to Sam there was a ghostlike quality in it. The sky was choked with stars, and these made a little light over flat and hills. They were a world of silver sheen with hints of velvet here and there. It occurred to Sam White that he was being tricked. This was no setting for such a drama as he and this girl were now playing. It was a night for a drama in which these jarring notes should be absent.

And so, being human, Sam White heaved a sigh. He felt a recurring astonishment at the way Laura was acting. Of course a girl like her would do anything to help a brother who had served her as her brother had. Only Sam hadn't thought she had it in her to act thisaway. This hard defiance didn't sit well on her; at least it was not in keeping with the mental picture of her which Sam had carried about with him. All of which goes to show that a man may be engaged in the drab pursuits which usually engaged Sam and he may still keep some high and lofty ideas on tap.

His impulse of course was to tell Laura everything. With a sudden outpouring of explanation he would have liked to clear up everything between them, so that she should become the girl he had known. But could he do that? He didn't know. Like a man venturing cautiously into strange country, he decided he would take a step or two.

"There's one thing I can tell you, ma'am," he said. "There was bad blood between Williams and Edwards."

Her face was suddenly illumined. She came closer to Sam, as if she wished to confirm by his looks what he had said.

"Then," she whispered, "Williams killed Edwards?"

"No," he returned, "Williams didn't kill Edwards."

"How do you know he didn't?"

"The evidence is too much the other way around," he answered. "I'll tell you what I think Williams said to Edwards over in that poolroom. We know it's a fact that your brother had warned Edwards away from here. He was practically runnin' Edwards out of the country.

"Well, your brother ain't a hasty man as a rule, is he? No! You bet not. He is a man that thinks things out as a rule. But in the case of Edwards he was throwed off his guard. He hopped to Edwards without givin' the matter no thought, just as any man would do. Afterwards he got to thinkin' things over. Here was you and him, in a country new to both of you. What was you doin' here? Why, you was gettin' yourselves established; you was makin' yourselves a home, just as people have been makin' themselves homes, in one way or another, ever since the first people come out here.

"Your brother would say to himself, wouldn't he, that he mustn't do anything to interfere with your plans. He must handle this fella Edwards, but he mustn't get into any trouble on his account. Well, your brother and Williams has been pretty friendly, haven't they, ma'am?"

"Yes; my brother likes Williams. He has said that Williams is sort of hard-boiled, but he is square. I have seen them together for an hour or so at different times, and they wouldn't say half a dozen words to each other. That means friendship among a certain kind of men, doesn't it?"

"It does! Well, when your brother got to thinkin' over his run-in with Edwards, his thoughts naturally drifted to his friend. Course Lassiter is his friend, but Lassiter is kinda old and kinda talkative. Your brother wanted somebody solid and substantial. So he thought of Williams. Him and Williams took a ride mebbe. As a result Williams laid for Edwards and followed him over to that village on one of Edwards' trips. He charged in on him at that poolroom, and he read the riot act to him. He told him that your brother meant business, and that if Edwards come back this way there would be trouble. By the way, where did Edwards go when he left your place that time?"

"Why, Williams said he had gone over to the Big Creek country."

"Over in the next county. Sure! He knowed I had been out here and had got acquainted with you folks, and he wanted to get out of my bailiwick. Well, Edwards wasn't the kind of a man that was goin' to take an insult quietly. He had been dealt with pretty rough by your brother and then Williams had brought a warnin' to him. That'd stir Edwards up pretty thoroughly. After a while he is found dead on your own land. What was he doin' over here by this pool? Why, he was layin' for your brother. He was goin' to get him. They met up—and Edwards fell down on his job. Isn't that pretty plain to you, ma'am?"

"Then my brother acted only in self-defense," she said.

"Who's goin' to prove it? Them two men was alone in the night when this thing happened. There was your brother's threats behind it all. That's what I don't like, and that is what made your brother act the way he did."

"Act the way he did?"

"Why, when he had killed Edwards he rode over to Lassiter's and got hold of Williams. He arranged with Williams that Williams was to find the body this mornin'. Williams was to tramp around in there and cover up the tracks there was. Williams himself can prob'ly prove that he wasn't anywhere near this pool at the time Edwards was shot."

"Why should Williams go to all this trouble for my brother?"

He couldn't tell her that if she didn't know it for herself. He couldn't tell her that Williams was just another man who had been attracted to her. Williams seemed to be a square gent. He would never bother her. He doubtless saw that to her he was just another puncher. But Williams would do everything he could for her, through her brother.

"Oh, men sticks together," he said carelessly.

"I'll tell you that if my brother killed Edwards it was in self-defense," she declared, "and if it was, he would be the first to come forward and say so. My brother isn't the kind of man to hide after he has done anything."

"MA'AM," said Sam White gravely, "I am saturated with the way things are done in this cattle country. I was brought up in it, and my folks was here for a long time before me. Laws, ma'am, is things that has been built up on top of something that lays a good deal deeper. You know, there was a time when there wasn't no law, when men decided for themselves what was right and proper. You don't kill that spirit in men in a generation. Williams and your brother had made up their minds that Edwards was no good. He was a man to be got rid of, to be run off. If he stayed, he stayed at his own risk. If he started anything, he started it at his own risk. Apparently he started something and he couldn't go through with it. Your brother got him.

"Well, what was your brother's position? I happen to know that he hasn't any money to throw away. Why, as things stand right now I have got to arrest him. In fact I have already arrested him. You don't need to worry none about that, ma'am. You can be sure that Williams and your brother have got things fixed so that no harm will come to your brother. But there is the meantime to consider. Your brother goes to a cell. He has a preliminary hearing. Mebbe he gets out on bail; mebbe he doesn't. He has to hire a lawyer. That's expensive. There's nobody here to look after his business. How much easier, ma'am, for him and Williams to get together and patch up the matter between themselves, so that there won't be no fuss and feathers. Why, ma'am, the thing is simplicity itself. It's what *I* would do in your brother's place."

"Well," Laura said spiritedly, "you are the only one that is making any trouble."

"You sent for me," he said.

"Somebody would have sent for you. The thing had to come out."

"And by the same token I had to get on the job. As a man I may approve of what your brother and Williams have done. It may all run true to what is in my blood, but, same time, I am the sheriff, and I'll be cussed if I ain't got a notion to throw up the job, once I get quit of this."

"Oh, no," she said quickly, "you mustn't do that. You are making a record, they say. The county needs you."

"Anyhow I couldn't throw up the job in the midst of this thing," he said. "That's how she stands. Looks to me like your brother killed Edwards. I got to act accordingly."

She seemed to droop a little, and when she spoke it was in a faltering tone.

"I see, Sheriff White," she said. "I didn't understand. You are free, as far as I am concerned."

"Sho, ma'am," he told her gently, a little wistfully, "I haven't been scared of that gun of yours none. I know you wouldn't shoot me. You have just been carried off your feet a little by this thing. No wonder! It's a hard thing for any girl to bear. S'pose we just ride up to your house and have a talk with your brother, and the thing will be over. I will have done what I have to do, and then I will be free to give him all the best of it."

"Let me think," she said, standing with eyes cast down for a while. When she looked at him again, he could not read what was in her face.

"So long as you are going to arrest my brother," she said, "you ought to have every shred of proof. Let me go up to the house and see him first. Maybe he would tell me where that vest is."

"That's the way to talk," Sam said. "We will get the thing cleared up, and then we will all be fighting side by side for your brother. Ain't that best?"

"Oh, that is best!"

Her horse had been tied in the shadow along the hills. She went to him, hopped to his back, and with a wave of her hand to Sam White, was gone.

Sam got his own horse and mounted him. There was nothing for him to do here. He was sure now that Merrill hadn't hidden the vest here. He had taken it with him and had hidden it at the house or had disposed of it.

He gave the girl fifteen minutes, which he thought would be ample, and then he set his horse to a gallop over the flat.

The horse made no noise in the sand as he approached the house, and a hundred feet from it, he slipped down and went forward on foot. He came to the kitchen door without having used any precautions as to silence. He didn't think Merrill would run away. Probably, confronted by his sister's knowledge about the vest, he would come through with the whole story. Sam White thought he now had but to make a formal arrest and take Merrill with him to the county seat.

Outside the kitchen door, however, with his hand raised to rap on it, he was struck by the utter lack of sound from within. There ought to be four people in that room. They had been through a somewhat trying scene. They hadn't had much time. It seemed to Sam that they could scarcely have finished talking the matter out. Yet if there were four people beyond that door, they were keeping mighty still.

He rapped. Instantly came Laura's voice, bidding him enter. He opened the door. Laura was alone in the room. She was standing beyond the table, as if she had intentionally put that between him and her. Sam White looked at her across it. Again he was astonished at the difference in her. She held herself very erect, and there was a defiant look in her eyes. A bitter disappointment swept through Sam.

"You have tricked me, ma'am," he stated.

"I wish you wouldn't think that," she said in a low voice.

"Where's your brother, then?"

"I came here. I asked him about the vest. He didn't say anything. He just looked at Lassiter and Williams.

"'That fella White,' said Lassiter, 'is smart. We had better be ridin'.'"

"And they rode?" Sam asked.

"They did."

"Where did they go?"

"Along the road, toward Lassiter's."

A flash of doubt went through Sam's mind. It was a horrible thing, that flash of doubt. If those men had gone toward Lassiter's, they were headed farther into Sam's bailiwick. In the other direction lay the next county. That was the way, Sam thought, in which they would naturally head.

WAS Laura, torn by dread of what might happen to her brother, deceiving him about what she had said to her brother? He didn't know. Damn this sheriff's job! It tangled a man all up. If he had not been sheriff, if he had been just a puncher, why, doggone it all, he would do just what Lassiter and Merrill and Williams were doing. But he was sheriff! He had to come back to that all the time.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I will be goin'."

He opened the door. Laura's voice stopped him.

"Mr. White," she said, "there is something about this that I don't understand. When I came home, I walked up to the door softly. I—I wasn't eavesdropping or spying exactly, but—well, I don't know, I thought I might get a clew. I heard Williams and my brother talking together. They were quarreling."

"Quarreling! Williams and your brother quarreling? I don't get that."

"No more do I."

"What were they quarreling about?"

"I couldn't make out. They were angry. I heard my brother say, 'You won't.' Williams swore. He said, 'I will.' Then my brother said, 'She's my sister. She's all I've got to take care of.' 'Ain't I a man?' Williams asked, in a funny voice.

"And that was all?"

Her color was like a sudden flood in her face.

"Williams made a little speech," she said. "'Merrill,' he said, 'you know the kind of man I am. You've met a hundred like me here and there. Been driftin' since I was a kid, siftin' in an' out an' all around the cattle country. Ownin' my own horse but little else besides. Always wantin' to see what was around the next corner. Never married. Never had time. Knowed a lot of girls. Never met one that I wanted to hitch to. Your sister is a fine girl. There is somethin' about her, Merrill, that stills a man, if you can get that. Lemme have my own way, Merrill. This is all nonsense.'"

Sam White felt like a rank outsider in this play now. He saw what Williams wanted to do. He wanted to step forward and say that he was Edwards' slayer. He wanted to shoulder whatever blame there would be. Then Merill would be free. Laura would have nothing to worry about. After his life of rambling, Williams had come to love Laura Merrill. He wanted to prove that love by a fine loyalty, having nothing else to offer.

"I see, ma'am," Sam said. "Well, I will have to get along over to Lassiter's. Them boys will prob'ly be waitin' there for me. You got no answer from your brother about the vest?"

"No."

"You didn't ask him when he would be back?"

"No; he only said he would take care of himself."

"Well, good-by, ma'am. I will see you later on."

"You are going to Lassiter's?"

"Yes, indeed."

Riding in the road, he was convinced the more by her last question that the men had not gone to Lassiter's. Yet that was the place for him to go to. If he set out in the other direction the men would elude him. Merrill could not travel far. Eventually Lassiter would have to come back to his ranch, and with him doubtless Williams. White could wait. Oh, he could wait! He had done it before. He had learned that patience is one of the biggest assets of a sheriff. And when Lassiter returned, he would wring the old boy's neck for him and maybe arrest him for one thing and another.

He rode up to Lassiter's house and halloed. It was a mere formality, he felt. Lassiter was probably well on his way in the other direction by now. But, surprisingly, Lassiter immediately opened the door. He was just distinguishable in the doorway.

"'Lo, Sam White," he called. "Merrill is here, and Williams, too."

Sam slid from his horse. He loosened his gun in its holster. What old Lassiter was going to pull off he didn't know. For a man of his age Lassiter was an impulsive old fool. He was like a boy when anything unusual was going on—sticking his old nose into it.

As he walked up to the door, Sam realized that there was no light in the room beyond.

"Put a match to your lamp," he ordered. "What you fellas sittin' in the dark for?"

"Savin' oil," Lassiter chuckled. "My supply is low." He half turned. "Put a match to her, in honor of the sheriff, Williams," he called.

A match was scraped, and the light from the lamp flowed through the room and, dimly, out past Lassiter.

"I'm comin' in," Sam announced. "Anybody that starts anything can be ready to go through with it."

Lassiter stepped back and Sam followed him into the room. Williams had seated himself and Merrill sat beyond him. Sam's eyes swept the room. Everything seemed a little too peaceful.

"It's all right, White," Merrill said. "There's something that might int'rest you."

He nodded toward the table. Sam saw a crumpled garment lying on it. He walked to the table and took it up. It was a vest. It had been saturated with blood, now dried. There was sand on it, too.

"My vest," Merrill said. "I tried to stop Edwards' flow of blood with it when I helped him toward the pool. I buried it between here and my house and dug it up on the way over."

"Merrill," said Sam a little shakily, "I have got to arrest you for Edwards' murder."

"I know," Merrill nodded. "I done it. I killed Edwards."

CHAPTER VI

LOYALTY

"TELL me about it, Merrill," White said gently.

"Why, there ain't much to tell," Merrill said. "Me and Edwards had had trouble. I was ridin' home just about dusk when I saw a man comin' towards me. I didn't pay any attention to him. I was thinkin' more about a drink of water than anything else. I was headed for that pool.

"When the man was mebbe three hundred feet from me, he suddenly spurred his horse and came at me at a gallop. I stopped. For a minute I didn't know what to think. Then I recognized Edwards, and I knew he was out to get me. He fired once, and I dragged my gun and let him have it. Somehow he stayed on his horse, and I rode up to him, and took up the horse, and just then Edwards begun to slip. I hopped down and eased him from his saddle. I saw he was bleedin' bad, and that he was worse hit than I had supposed. I pulled off my vest while he leaned against me, and I pressed the vest over his wound. I asked him could he walk with my help, and he nodded. I supported him till we got to the pool. I took him inside and let him down, and he died right there under my hand. I went on home."

"How did you get word to Williams?" White asked.

"Word to Williams? I didn't get no word to Williams."

"He didn't," Williams added. "I tell you I just rode over that way and found Edwards' body accidental. That's all there is to that."

"Your scrap with Edwards over at that poolroom was accidental, too?" White suggested.

"What scrap."

"You went into that poolroom and found Edwards there. You walked up to him and handed him a line of talk. What was that all about?"

"Huh," said Williams. "You been snoopin' round, eh? Well, you didn't find out what that line of talk was. Go back there and take another shot at findin' out."

"Mebbe I will," White said. "Well, Merrill I expect we better be movin'."

Merrill rose. Lassiter came to his feet at the same moment. He dragged out his gun and leveled it at White.

"Don't you move, White," he ordered. "This thing ain't settled yet by a long ways. Can't you see that Merrill killed that fella in self-defense? You can't take a man up on anything like that."

"Merrill says he killed in self-defense," said Sam. "That is something that will have to be threshed out."

"You think he is lyin'?" the old cattleman demanded.

"I don't think anything about it. The law don't allow me to think about it. That is a matter for the courts. I am just an officer whose duty it is to take Merrill into custody. Which I am doin'. Put up your gun, Lassiter."

"Not yet!"

Here was loyalty, White saw. Old Lassiter had been a friend to Merrill ever since Merrill had been in this country. Lassiter's friendship was no idle thing. It would stand the acid test. The old man was likely to get into trouble himself for what he was doing, but he was willing to take a chance on that.

"Merrill," he went on, "I am takin' you away from the sheriff. Fact is, I have taken you away from him. You are a free man. Hop your horse an' ride. I will see that nothing happens to your sister."

A spasm of pain went across Merrill's face. The face was suddenly haggard.

"I can't do it, Lassiter," he said. "This will be an awful thing for Laura, but me bein' a fugitive would be a more awful thing. She can't abide a man that runs away from anything. She would rather see me behind the bars than scuttlin' here an' there like some slinkin' rat. I got to go with White. No jury will convict me."

"Thass right," Lassiter agreed, "but think of you bein' locked up for mebbe quite a spell. Think of that courtroom. The crowd. The testimony—what there will be of it. Think of your sister bein' there an' havin' to stand it all. Why, man, it ain't human. It ain't no right way to treat that girl."

"Men," White said in a strained voice, "this ain't no easy thing for me. We all been thinkin' of your sister in this matter. Williams has been thinkin' of her. Las—"

"You can cut that out," Williams snapped.

"You're a good man, Williams," White said patiently. "I ain't tryin' to hand you anything. Lassiter has been thinkin' of her. Merrill o' course has been thinkin' of her. If he hadn't been, he would have come walkin' into my office. I have been thinkin' of her. I have let her hold me up twice since I come out here."

"Hold you up?" Merrill asked.

"Hold me up. I let her do it because I was helpless. She said she would shoot me. I knowed she wouldn't, but I couldn't snatch the gun out of her fingers, could I?"

"Then she thought I killed Edwards?" Merrill said.

"She knowed you had had that fight with Edwards. What could she think when you come home with mud on your clothes, and there ain't no such mud around that marsh where your cow was bogged down? She read you, Merrill."

"She didn't say nothin'," Merrill said.

"No," said White, "she has been keepin' up her nerve."

"LASSITER!" This was Williams speaking. Williams had got to his feet. His face was red, but White did not know whether it was from anger or excitement.

Lassiter did not turn away from White. His eyes were steadily on the sheriff, and his gun was still up when he answered:

"Well, Williams?"

"You stick your gun on Merrill," Williams directed.

"On Merrill. I ain't holdin' up Merrill."

"You hold him up. I ain't got no time for him. I want to talk to White. Do as I tell you, Lassiter. I will give Merrill a clean bill of health."

Merrill sprang up. He took one step toward Williams. Lassiter turned the gun on him.

"I dunno what this play is," the old man said, "but it looks like I better back it. Williams sure has got somethin' on his mind. What is it, Williams!"

"White," Williams said, "I killed Edwards, and I can prove it to you."

"Go ahead and prove it," the sheriff said.

"Lemme tell you the beginnin' of it. Merrill had had his row with Edwards. Reports come to him that Edwards was hangin' around the villages. He wasn't talkin'. He wasn't sayin' anything. He was just hangin' around. Fact is, I had seen Edwards over to our county seat one night late. Next day I was ridin' down here a way and I met up with Merrill. I told him about Edwards. I said he had better go into town and clean up with that fella. When a man hangs around, keepin' his mouth shut, it ain't no good sign, as we all know.

"I can see Merrill now as plain as day, as he sat his horse lookin' down at the ground. His face was kinda puckered up, and I could see that he was disturbed in his mind.

"'Williams,' he said, 'I wish that fella would blow. Either him or me is goin' to get hurt if he stays around here. If I hurt him or kill him, my sister will suffer. If he gets me, she will suffer. I am kinda up a tree, Williams.'

"'Why,' I says, 'the way to handle a snake like him is to give him one more warnin'. Then if he crawls across your path, let him have it. If you like, I will carry that warnin' to him.'"

"He's makin' this up, White," Merrill broke in.

"It's an interestin' fairy story," White rejoined drily. "Let's have the rest of it, Williams."

"I knowed that if Merrill consented to let me go to Edwards, it'd be on'y because he was worried," Williams went on. "You know how it is when a man gets into a jam and he has somebody besides himself to think of. He can't do no straight thinkin'. So Merrill asked me if I would go to Edwards and tell him, once for all, that there was no place for him in this country. I said I would go.

"Well, mebbe I made that message a little stronger than I should have. I laid for Edwards, and followed him that night over to this other village. I seen him go into the poolroom, and I went in there. I went straight up to him. I told him there wasn't no room for him hereabouts. He opened his lips to speak. I whispered.

"I said, 'Edwards, if you meet me or Merrill from now on, be ready to shoot it out. We won't take no monkeyin' from you.' Then I walked out of there.

"I been keepin' my eye on Edwards. You ask Lassiter if I ain't been ridin' a good deal at night. You ask him if there was any reason for me bein' down by that pool this mornin' Well, if there wasn't no reason, how come I found that body? How did I happen to be Johnny-on-the-Spot? Why, I was down by that pool last night. I hadn't seen Edwards around any place, and I went down there to keep an eye on Merrill. I knowed he would be comin' up that way about dusk.

"He come all right, and I was drawed back among the shadows as he headed in there. He was out on the flat mebbe two hundred feet when a horse come dashin' out from the hills. The man on the horse fired right away. I had my gun in my hand, and I throwed a bullet into that fella. He swayed in his saddle, and I run out to him. Merrill reached him at the same time. I held him in his saddle while Merrill tore off his vest. Both of us let him down from his horse and supported him to the pool. There wasn't room for me and Merrill to go in there together, so Merrill went in with him. He died right under Merrill's hand like Merrill says, but it was my bullet, not Merrill's, that killed him. And them are the facts, White."

"Why does Merrill insist that he killed him, then?" White asked.

"Why, gosh, it's this here honor stuff," Williams said. "As soon as we knowed Edwards was dead, Merrill sprung that on me. He said to me that he had dragged me into the thing and that there mustn't be a shadow of suspicion on me. We argued the matter back and forth for some time. Then we agreed we would let the whole matter ride and see what you done. If you turned up somethin', we would tell the straight story. That was our agreement, but I see now that Merrill never meant to keep that agreement. He has got a silly notion that if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have had to shoot Edwards. He figures I saved his life by shootin' Edwards. He thinks he is double in my debt, and he is goin' to take the blame. Now, it's all plain enough to you, ain't it, White?"

"Where's your proof?" White asked.

"Proof. Why, I have just give you a carload of proof. What more do you want?"

"You have give me a carload of talk," White said. "I don't see no proof in it. What do you say to this, Merrill?"

"I say it's silly," Merrill declared. "Think I would say I had killed a man if I hadn't?"

"You might. This honor stuff, as Williams calls it, will hold a man like a chain. This is a funny case. Generally an officer has trouble gettin' one man for one crime. Here I got two men for one crime, an' each confessin'. I got to make a choice. I choose Merrill. He had the motive. You didn't have no motive, Williams."

There was a moment of complete silence. Once more White dropped his statement into the pool of that silence, casually now:

"You didn't have no motive, Williams."

Williams leaned forward in his chair. His face was hard. He ground his hands together.

"Dammit it, White," he said at last, "you are a fool. I did have a motive. I—I have never met a girl like Miss Merrill before. I ain't hopin' for nothin' in that direction. I know I'm out of it, but a man can't help what he feels. I'd do anything for her. I told Edwards that night I had a notion to kill him where he stood. It made my blood boil even to think of his lookin' at Miss Merrill. I was layin' for him last night. I'd have got him if Merrill hadn't been there. Now, you bonehead, is that plain enough?"

"Is it plain enough to you, Merrill?" White asked softly.

"No, it ain't," Merrill cried. "I tell you I killed Edwards."

Again there was silence. Williams sat humped forward in his chair. White fixed his eyes on him. He had had to study men since he had been sheriff. He was slowly making up his mind now.

"I'm still pickin' Merrill," he said at last. "Lassiter, can I trust you?"

"You can trust *me,*" Merrill stated. "Never mind about Lassiter. This thing lies between you and me now. What is it you want?"

"There is just one thing I got to look up," White answered. "It will take me mebbe a coupla hours. Will you be here when I come back, Merrill?"

"I will be here."

White rose.

"Look here," Williams called, suddenly pulling himself together.

"Not a word, Williams," White said coldly. "You be here when I get back, too, if you want to."

"You know I won't leave."

"That's what I thought."

Sam went outside. He mounted his horse and rode out on the flat in the general direction of the Merrill ranch house. He had been swayed toward a decision, but he wanted to thresh this thing out. Under the stars, alone in the night, he believed he could thresh it out better than when four walls enclosed him.

CHAPTER VII

"ALL I'VE GOT"

FOR half an hour he drifted aimlessly on his horse. His brain was busy, seeking a plan by which he might shake his man. This sheriff always turned to others for aid reluctantly. He liked to depend upon himself, to play his own game. Entrance of others into any affair in which he was concerned was confusing to him. Yet he saw now that he would have to have help. He would have to have Laura Merrill's help.

With that decision reached, he picked up his horse and galloped away toward the Merrill ranch house. Laura opened the door to him, and with her eyes now rather anxiously on his face, she bade him enter.

"Did you find them?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "They were at Lassiter's. Williams insists that he killed Edwards."

"I knew my brother didn't do it," she said warmly.

"However," White said drily, "your brother insists that he did it."

"Well, they both didn't do it."

"Course not."

"What is your explanation?"

"It's like this," White said seriously. "Your brother is livin' up to the only code he knows. He figures he got Williams into this thing and he isn't going to let Williams suffer. You see, Williams is a rambler. It don't do a rambler no good to be arrested. A rambler is liable to get into a jam at any time. First thing the law does is to look up his record. If he gets on the witness stand and the matter is opened up, a foxy lawyer can ask him if he has ever been arrested and what for. That always has weight with a jury. It don't make much difference that a man can say he was arrested for murder but was acquitted. Juries is peculiar. If a man has been arrested once, they think it is a stain on him, and they are liable to hand it to him. Your brother doesn't want that stain put on Williams. He feels he is responsible for Williams. It is a square play he is makin'."

"You don't think my brother is guilty, then?"

"I didn't say that. Williams has got a reason for makin' the play he is makin'. I don't know that I was ever mixed up in a case where men had as strong motives for what they are doin' as these men have."

"What would Williams' motive be for shielding my brother?" Laura asked.

Out under the stars Sheriff White had anticipated just that question.

"I don't expect you have ever got very well acquainted with a rambler, have you, ma'am?" he asked. "Course there are ramblers an' ramblers. There is the rambler that is so crooked he meets hisself comin' back. I ain't speakin' of that kind. He ain't worth speakin' about. Williams is the kind of rambler I mean. He is square; when he works he works hard; he ain't got faults to speak of except that he has to be on the go. It don't matter that the place he is goin' to may not be so good a place as the place he is leavin'. He has got to make a trip to some place every so often. That is the kind of rambler this here Williams is.

"Now, ma'am, these here ramblers has always got a kind of a home-bee buzzin' in their bonnets. They keep thinkin' that some day they will have homes of their own. Some of 'em get 'em; some of 'em don't. It seems to me that Williams has got the home-bee pretty strong. He come here and he found you and your brother makin' a home. He got what they call sentimental about it. Why, ma'am, some of them ramblers has got such strong imaginations that they can see themselves all fixed up in a home of their own once they lay eyes on other folks in a home. It is a peculiarity of the breed, I reckon. It comes to Williams, when he learns of your brother's run-in with Edwards, that nothin' must happen to disturb this here home that you and your brother are workin' so hard to establish. Edwards is shot. Mebbe Williams did shoot him. If he didn't, he is standin' by to take the blame, so it won't fall on your brother. Is all that plain enough, ma'am?"

"I know my brother would not let another man suffer for what he had done, in the slightest degree," Laura said. "I am sure there are other men such as you describe. I suppose it is a kind of loneliness in Williams."

"I suppose it is."

"It isn't—isn't that Williams cares anything about me?" she asked.

"Shucks, ma'am, that driftin' hombre ain't never been still enough to become interested in a girl," Sam White lied. "No; it ain't that. You are in his mind only because he don't want you to be disturbed. His main play is for your brother. He is what they call a man's man, ma'am."

"Well, I'm glad of that," she said. "Well, what are you going to do to get at the bottom of this matter, Mr. White?"

"Ma'am," said Sam, "a plan come to me while I was ridin' out yonder a while ago. You will prob'ly think it is ridiculous, an' mebbe it is. It is the best I've got, however. Did you ever faint, ma'am?"

"Faint? Why, no."

"I didn't suppose you ever had. Could you faint now, ma'am? Could you kind of wilt down in your chair and let me bring you a glass of water. Could you say, 'I can't bear it. I can't bear it?'"

Laura looked at him for a moment speculatively. Then she nodded.

"I think I understand," she said.

She sank back in her chair and closed her eyes. Sam White took one good look at her. He thought he had that much coming to him. Then he brought her a glass of water. Her head was against the back of the chair. Her face was lifted. If she had really fainted, he would have been free to put his hand under her head and lift it, but he did not feel free to do so now.

"Try to drink this, ma'am," he said.

She slowly lifted her head and sipped some of the water. She let her head fall back.

"I can't bear it," she said. "I can't bear it."

"You just sit still for a minute, ma'am," said the sheriff. "I'm goin'."

"You are terribly honest, aren't you, Mr. White?" she said. "You want to report a make-believe happening at least."

"My honesty don't bother me much," Sam returned cheerfully. "It's only that I ain't a very good actor."

HE HASTENED from the room, mounted his horse, and sped back to Lassiter's. He made a good deal of ado about his arrival at the ranch house. Those inside the house could not fail to believe that he had arrived in excited haste. That was the fact. Lassiter threw open the door and stood there. White threw himself from his horse and staggered through the door. He seemed to be almost entirely out of breath. The three men were on their feet, crowding up to him. Merrill had a prescience of disaster.

"Have you been to my house?" he asked. "Has somethin' happened to my sister?"

"Stand back and gimme air," Sam ordered.

He took off his hat and mopped at his forehead. He was quite sure that they would not observe that it was dry.

"For God's sake, what's happened?" Merrill asked.

Sam fixed him with scornful eyes.

"Cuss you, Merrill," he said, "you are a fine specimen of a man. You ought to be horsewhipped for treatin' a sister like you got the way you have treated her. Killin' a man, bringin' grief to her, makin' her faint dead away."

"Faint?" Merrill queried. "What do you mean, faint?"

Sam took the precaution of getting to his feet. He backed away from the three men and drew his gun. He didn't know what Merrill would do exactly, but he was sure that Merrill would want to make a break for home.

"All of you stand back there where I can watch you in a bunch," White ordered. "Don't start nothin' now. I've stood all the nonsense I'm goin' to stand."

He looked as if he had stood all the nonsense he was going to stand. His eyes were narrowed, and since the lamplight caught them, he looked as if he were glaring angrily. His mouth was hard. There was a flush in his cheeks. They didn't know it but it was only a flush which uncertainty brought. They thought it was due to anger.

"I went over to your house, Merrill, and told your sister what had happened, how you had confessed to a brutal murder," Sam said. "She went all of a heap in her chair. I brought her water, but she only whispered, 'I can't bear it. I can't bear it'."

"Where is she now?" Merrill asked. "I must get to her."

"She is at home. I left her sittin' in her chair. I couldn't stand the sight of her. Her grief was terrible, Merrill. I expect she will need a doctor."

"Let me go to her," Merrill said, and he started forward.

"You can't go to her," White declared. "You are under arrest. You will have to go with me. I expect she will get herself in hand so she can come to see you tomorrow. She will see you behind bars. She will have the work of gettin' a lawyer. She will be in the courtroom later on. Gosh, I wish there was some way of sparin' her all that."

"It ain't like Laura to faint," Lassiter put in.

"It is these strong women that goes under fast sometimes," Williams said. "Merrill is certainly hurtin' a girl that he promised hisself to look after."

Merrill was now staring at the floor. Sam looked at Lassiter and Williams out of the corner of his eye. Old Lassiter was plainly puzzled. Williams was skeptical. Sam gave him a look that should have burned him up. Williams started and then controlled himself.

"You better go over and see what you can do for that girl, Lassiter," he said.

Slowly Merrill lifted his head. He looked at Williams.

"Williams," he said, "I don't know what you are goin' to think of me."

"For doin' what you should have done long ago?" Williams asked. "If you do it, I will only say that you have got some sense."

"All I own will be at your disposal?" Merrill said. "I'll spend down to the last cent for you. White, Williams killed Edwards. He killed him just like he said. Edwards was gunnin' for me, and Williams got him."

"I knowed it," White declared.

"You knowed it," Lassiter jeered. "You didn't know nothin' of the kind. How could you tell whether Merrill or Williams was tellin' the truth?"

"Huh," said White. "I could see that Merrill was tellin' a stubborn story, tellin' it stubbornly. He was hangin' to it like a tenderfoot hangs to a saddle horn. Williams' story was real. A man like Williams don't open hisself up like Williams done unless he is tellin' the truth. Williams' story had a ring to it."

"The only story I told had to do with Edwards," Williams declared. "Any man that thinks he is rememberin' anything else had better forget it."

"Why, it was the Edwards story I was referrin' to," White agreed. "I didn't hear you say nothin' else."

"Nor me," Lassiter chimed in.

"Am I under arrest?" Williams asked.

"I got a feelin' against arrestin' men like you," White said. "Far as I'm concerned you can always say, when you are far from here, that you have never been arrested. I will parole you to this old so-called cattleman here. He will bring you into my office to-morrow. Office, not jail, though they are in the same buildin'. I can straighten this matter out, I think. You will have to bring Merrill with you. It'd be a good idea if you got together and decided what you were goin' to say. I don't want you to ball things up like you balled 'em up here."

"Huh," said Lassiter, "I bet I could fix this matter up by myself. If I could do it, it will be pie for our great an' only sheriff."

"He's got a head on his shoulders at that," Williams said.

"Who hasn't?" Lassiter asked. "But there is heads and heads. Well, are we goin' to get over to Merrill's or stand here the rest of the night?"

CHAPTER VIII

"MA'AM, MA'AM"

MERRILL came out of his house. He was looking rather subdued.

"How is she?" Williams asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"Why, she's all right now," Merrill answered. "I thought her eyes was kinda red. Looked like she had found relief by cryin'. Long time since she has cried, Williams. She ain't the cryin' kind."

"Certainly not," Williams agreed. "I knowed all along she was a good game girl."

"How did she act?" White asked anxiously.

"Why, she read me the riot act," Merrill answered. "I don't never remember seein' her quite so mad. She made me feel like a bonehead."

"Natural feelin'," Williams offered. "You was makin' a silly play. Everybody sees it but you."

"Well, I have paddled my own canoe for a long time," Merrill said quietly. "I don't generally figure on standin' from under."

"Oh, I wasn't hintin' nothin' like that," Williams agreed.

"Everybody knows you are a good, square man, Merrill," old Lassiter put in.

"Sheriff White has been on the level," Merrill said. "He can count on me backin' him at any time. By the way, White, my sister wants to speak to you for a minute. I expect she wants to explain about that faintin' spell and apologize for it. Honest, White, it wasn't like her."

"Don't I know it?" White asked. "Why, I really ought to be gettin' back to town."

"Oh, don't let her think you are mad at her," Merrill said. "She has been through a good deal."

White knocked on the door and entered when Laura bade him to do so. He stood just inside the threshold. Laura smiled.

"Well, it worked," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. It worked, but I feel kind of ashamed of myself."

"I supposed you would," she said, "but you will get over that. There is something I want to explain to you."

"You don't need to explain nothin' to me, ma'am."

"It's about holding you up," she said. "Do you know why I did it?"

"Why, to get a square deal for your brother, to make sure I didn't do him any injustice."

"No! To make you give yourself a square deal."

"I don't think I understand that, ma'am."

She flushed but she held her head high.

"Sheriff White," she said, "you don't know how good a man you are. What I was afraid of was this: You would come out here, and you would find evidence that my brother killed Edwards. I thought he had done it—to protect himself of course. I was afraid you would be swayed by—by—on account of me. I was afraid you wouldn't do your duty if you found my brother guilty. So I held you up to make you mad in the first place and to force you to do what I wanted you to do in the second."

"Why, I knowed all along you wouldn't shoot me," Sam said.

"Yes, and I knew you wouldn't touch me to take the gun from me. That was as good as the prospect of my shooting you. I wanted you to do your duty without regard to me, and that was the only way I could think of."

"Why was you so keen to have me do my duty?" White asked.

"Why, I—I—my first thought was of you. Somehow I turned to you naturally. You are so dependable—sort of, Sheriff White."

"Why, ma'am, ma'am," Sheriff White murmured.

They stood looking at each other across the dimly lighted kitchen. At last they smiled together, quietly, youthfully, with a new understanding between them.

THE GAMBLING WESTERNER

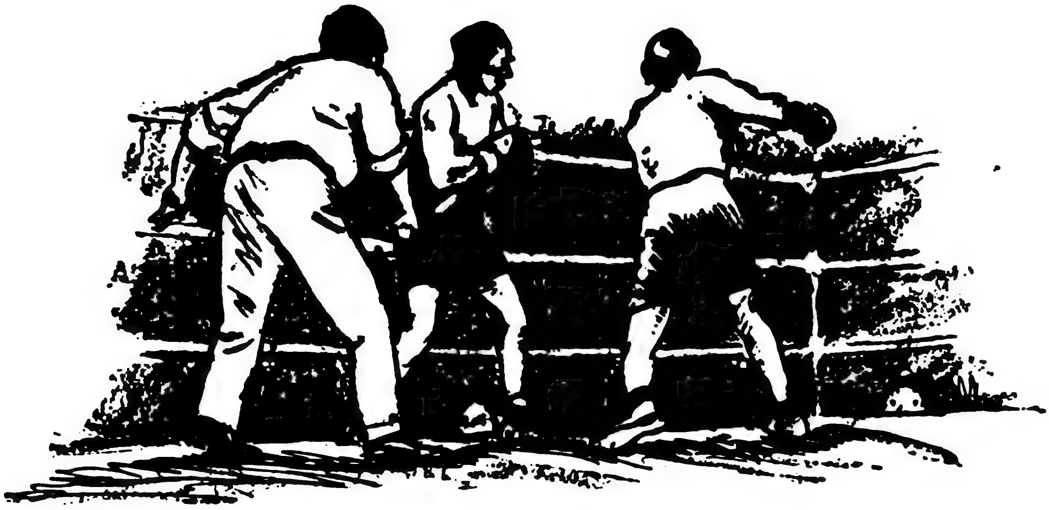
IF ANY one ever goes West because that is a sensible thing to do, then the West will be dead. As long as it is a gamble, an adventure, an experience, a waste of time and a funny thing to do, we may be sure of finding what we ought to have somewhere beyond the Missouri and Mississippi. If any one wants to know whether he or she is sure of finding enough work to do out there, I'll reply, yes. But as for getting pay for it, enough to live on, I don't know.

Rolling westward one day I saw a tincan tourist hop out of his flivver and remove a rock from the road—behind him. He went on his way. He was very impractical, like those campers who do not leave the rubbish picked up and the garbage decently disposed of, because they are not returning that way. But I love that fellow who took an obstacle out of my way, and out of the way of those who may have followed me. In money he was never to be requited. Indeed, he lost time which we are told is money. But he was going West and he had a vision of service, not of profit, to tempt him on to his fate of adventure and hope. And if we note the grades of the trails where they ascend to the Passes of the Continental Divides we shall see how wonderfully well the pathfinders and pathclearers have performed their toil. In Colorado we'll see road camps along the way. We'll note the faces of the toilers, wondering that they have such hurt expressions, for they are performing splendid tasks. Presently it occurs to us that they are convicts, atoning for their sins. They stumbled on their way—but they are saving us many a trip and many a fall.

Curiosity is aroused throughout the West by just such conspicuous gallantries of the wicked in the development of affairs. The unhung, the uncaught scoundrels beat our paths to the land of inspiration. Some old stock-jobber, driving a last spike in a railroad, may wonder in his soul how comes he is permitted thus to put the finishing touch on a fine enterprise? The West is dotted with forgotten or faintly remembered places where seemingly utterly inadequately moraled men have made the West a feasible example for the emulation of the rest of the world. Honest Injun, the West is an awful bad moral in some of its respects, for some of the finest things developed out of intentions terribly bad.

Men who ran away became heroes! Nice people often failed to amount to a heap of shucks.

— *Raymond S. Spears*



WALTER W. LIGGETT

Tells About the Last Great Fight of Elbows McMullen

The HIGH DIVER

AS THE long freight train groaned protestingly to a halt beside the lonely way station water tank, two husky brakemen swung down from the caboose, whistling blithely, and strode towards the front end. Half way up the long string of box cars they suddenly halted, swiftly threw open the side door of an empty and a moment later the struggling figure of a man was jerked out feet foremost, deposited on the right-of-way with a thud, then expertly hurled head first down the steep embankment into a pile of cinders.

The tooting blasts of the engine sounded suspiciously like a hoarse laugh as the rudely ejected wayfarer staggered to his feet. The train jerked into motion again and the brakeman, outlined against the sky on top of a box car, waved a derisive farewell.

"Elbows" McMullen's eyes narrowed, his thin, scarred lips twisted out futile curses, and his battered, bloated, unshaven face reddened with rage as he malevolently stood staring after the retreating train.

"Those damned shacks," he muttered. "They'd never have thrown me off if I hadn't been sleepin'. Where in hell am I now?"

He spat out a mouthful of dust, mechanically combing the cinders from his hair and brushing the grime from his wrinkled clothes, all the while curiously surveying his surroundings. He had sneaked into the empty box car at Minot, North Dakota, two days before, after a friendly switchman had told him the train was bound for the Twin Cities. But now he failed to place himself. Certainly there was no such dense pine forests on the prairies of Central Minnesota. Suddenly the solution came to him.

"Hell," he muttered, "they must have switched that car on the Duluth train last night at the Forks. That was what all that bumping was about." He was far from Minneapolis where he had been promised a six round preliminary bout on the following day. He was marooned on a "one train a day road" with no chance of making his destination in time to keep his engagement. The train, the smoke of its engine a black smudge against the horizon, was disappearing behind the distant bend. For a few moments more he stood cursing, reviling himself, the brakemen and the universe with equal bitterness, staring down the railroad right-of-way until the long lines of shining steel rails under the blazing mid-May sun seemed to dance and shimmer in his vision.

Abruptly he stopped swearing and once more his gaze swept the desolate countryside. "Guess I'll have to live off the country," he grumbled, "and the pickings look pretty poor."

Snatching up his cap, he dusted it off, set it jauntily on his head, scrambled through the barbed wire fence, and set off along the dusty, dirt road that wound between the railroad tracks and the pine forest. He did not go towards the little way side station. Instead, he turned his steps in the opposite direction where a break in the sea of waving pine tops indicated a clearing and a possible farm. He had no intention of meeting a "railroad bull" and boarding at county expense. The "hicks" offered better grub—even if he had to work for it—and besides he had no intention of lingering in this vicinity. Once fed he would look up train schedules and plan his departure for the nearest big city.

He knew only too well that there was nothing prepossessing in his appearance. He was a stranger in a strange land and even his presence would inevitably give rise to suspicion. He was conscious, too, of a faintness, a giddiness, that came from hunger, and the torturing thirst that burned him like a fever recalled with painful clearness the beginning of the debauch that had brought his sudden flight from Minot. Yet, as he strode down the road, erect for all his weakness, there was a certain indomitable swagger about the man, a hint of power and grace in his carriage, an implacable purpose stamped in his shrewd but sullen stare. Elbows McMullen was his nickname among the sporting fraternity, and even in this extremity, with a frayed one dollar bill between his sock and his shoe representing his total available cash assets, he still presented his elbow to the world.

McMullen had been right in his guess about the farm. As he rounded a turn in the road a wide clearing lay before him. Fields of rippling green alternated with steaming patches of black, freshly upturned loam. Dun colored cattle were grazing in a woodland meadow. Two furlongs from the road on a little hill, a white cottage and a huge red barn made a splash of color amid a clump of fir and poplar. A cone shaped silo towered above the trees like a medieval turret. Half way between the road and the farm buildings a heavy, stooped man was plodding behind a plow drawn by a team of roan horses. In a nearby plot of land, only rising now and then to refill her looped apron from a sack of seed potatoes, a woman was crawling back and forth, slowly, methodically, like a giant beetle.

Elbows McMullen cast an appraising eye upwards. The sun was high; it must be nearly noon; food would soon be available—if he were diplomatic. He made a few tentative dabs at his face with a soiled bandanna handkerchief, tightened his belt, fixed his cap at a still jauntier angle, vaulted the low rail fence and confidently struck across the fields toward the plowing farmer.

"Hello! Need any help?" called McMullen, approaching the plowing farmer just as he reached the end of a furrow.

The farmer straightened in surprise. He was a Swede, a huge man, standing nearly six feet four. A shock of unruly corn colored hair escaped from under the edge of his felt hat. His face was as frank as a child's. For a moment he stood regarding McMullen gravely with a clear, friendly expression in his mild blue eyes.

"You are a good farm hand?" he asked doubtfully.

"Sure. I can milk cows, handle horses, push a plow, plant potatoes and hoe like hell," McMullen lied easily. He did not have the slightest intention of remaining there to work, but that revelation could wait until after dinner. Big as the farmer was McMullen had no fear of his consequent wrath.

"I need a farm hand," the farmer said slowly, "but you look like a city fellow."

"Sure, I've been in a city a few years, but I was born on a farm. Give me a chance; I'll show you."

"Well, I'll give you a try, then," assented the big Scandinavian, "but you'll have to work like hell if you stay with me. Come, we eat now." Unhooking the trace lines, the farmer drove the team towards the farm building. Walking beside him, McMullen noticed that the woman he had seen had quietly flitted away, doubtless to prepare dinner. McMullen's mouth watered in anticipation.

"I'll feed the horses," said the farmer as they reached the barn door. "You go to the kitchen and wash up. You'll find Freda there. She's my girl. Tell her I sent you."

"Kind of a nice bozo," commented McMullen as he swaggered towards the rear porch of the cottage. "Wonder what he'll try to do when I beat it after dinner?" His nose twitched as he sniffed the savory smell of cooking viands as he mounted the porch and knocked at the screen door of the kitchen. He could not suppress a grin of self-satisfaction.

"Come in," called a mellow, contralto voice. McMullen entered—and abruptly ceased grinning.

HE HAD expected to see some scrubby country girl, a work creature of the fields, an unkempt slattern—instead he found a beauty. McMullen's knowledge of folk-lore was slight. He did not know he was gazing upon a true daughter of the Vikings in lineal descent, a veritable Valkyrie—but he did dimly sense the fact that she resembled a goddess of some sort. Ah, he had it now, she was a dead ringer for a picture of a girl on a brewery ad that once had hung in his room.

She was taller than McMullen, superbly proportioned, with a mass of corn colored hair and the same sky blue eyes as her father. Her cheeks were like a ripening apple, adorably dimpled; her mouth seemed made for kissing; her large, firm round white arms were almost bare to the shoulder, and Elbows McMullen felt that he would cheerfully submit to being shot the next second if they would encircle his neck for a single fleeting instant.

Cynics may sneer, but there *is* such a thing as love at first sight and it had hit Elbows McMullen and hit him hard. Battered alike by flying fists and fortune, burned out by dissipation, thoroughly disillusioned, the first sight of her revived every dream of his boyhood and stirred his last vestige of lingering decency. That is why he stood staring at her, love leaping out of his eyes, mouth open with mingled admiration and amazement, a deep flush suffusing his battered countenance.

"I'm—I'm the new hired man," he said finally.

"I'm Freda Nelson," she answered easily, with a swift glance of appraisal.

"I'm—I'm Elbow—I'm Mike McMullen," he responded, too flabbergasted to lie.

"You'll find a clean towel by the sink," she said, turning to the kitchen range. "Father'll be here in a minute. Then we can start eating. Are you going to stay long?"

"Yes," said Elbows McMullen. He meant it, too. He recognized destiny. She drew him like a magnet. He knew wild horses could not pull him from that spot. But he also knew what it would mean for a man of his type to be marooned in such a lonely country-side. "To work like hell" —for one thing—and he sighed even as he surrendered.

Nels Nelson's prediction came true. Elbows McMullen did have to "work like hell." No other phrase so accurately describes his torture. He knew nothing whatever of farm work—except how to drive horses—and he was compelled to confess as much before the end of his first afternoon's labor. But he was strong and willing and he suavely flattered the old Scandinavian. Nels really needed help and under his expert tutelage McMullen learned to milk, to plow, to drive a harrow and cultivator, to hoe, to pitch and load hay, and on rainy afternoons they chopped trees, dug out gnarled stumps, or picked rocks from the fields with a "stone-boat."

McMullen did not learn to do these things in a week, or even a month and the learning of them was not easy. Soft living and hard liquor had put plenty of fat on McMullen's stocky frame and for all his occasional fighting his muscles had become flabby. Fourteen, fifteen and sometimes sixteen hours a day of back breaking labor under a broiling sun taxed his endurance to the limit. He had trained for many fights in his early days, but he found the stern routine of the training camp mere child's play compared with this unremitting toil. Old Nels was a hard task master. He drove himself and he drove McMullen.

There were days in the haying field when Elbows thought he would collapse from sheer exhaustion. Soaked in sweat, half blinded by the particles of straw that dropped down in his eyes, long before the sunset heralded quitting time, he would find himself gritting his teeth with the intensity of effort required to heave each forkful of heavy green hay on top of a tea foot load. Often he was so utterly spent that he actually staggered from one hay cock to another. But McMullen was no quitter. He could not bear to lay himself open to the jibes of the older man—and there was Freda.

Day after day he grimly held himself to his appointed tasks and night after night, when the chores were finished, too tired to talk or even think, he lurched upstairs and fairly fell into bed for eight hours' dreamless sleep before old Nels' stentorian voice would rouse him long before dawn. He was too weary, too stiff, too pain wracked to sit on the porch in the dusk for a half hour chat with Freda.

But in time this unrelenting labor began to have its effect. Day after day the poison toxins engendered by years of dissipation were sweated out of his pores. Night after night the hours of sleep built up his burned out tissue and the night winds, weighted with the fragrant odor of the pine forests, touched him like a healing balm. The fat fell away from him, his muscles swelled and grew harder, he ate ravenously of plain food, and finally he was able to keep up with old Nels. When night came he was no longer drunk with exhaustion. His eyes were clear, a healthy tan had replaced the florid whisky flush on his face, and on Sundays as he loafed about the barn he often found himself unconsciously "shadow boxing" to work off his bubbling energy. To use his own expression, he "felt like a fighting cock."

Nels had come to like McMullen, and now a chance occurrence heightened his esteem. They had driven to Grand Rapids with a load of hogs—it was a rainy Saturday—and as they were returning through the main street, its high planked sidewalks crowded with shopping farmers and roistering river-men, they passed a team of handsome bays struggling to pull a dray heavily loaded with brick out of a deep rut in the sawdust covered street.

Thrice the horses lunged forward in their collars and thrice their pawing hooves could find no footing in the slippery street. Suddenly the driver, a bulky, black-browed French-Canadian, started to lash the horses furiously, to the accompaniment of a storm of curses.

McMullen's eyes narrowed as he watched the wantonly brutal beating and his mouth grew grim.

"Lay off that, pal," he commanded abruptly. "I'll hitch on and help pull you out, but you've no call to beat them horses. They're doing the best they can."

"That's right," came several sympathetic voices from the swiftly gathering crowd.

"I'll beat you, you damned farmer," the teamster shouted, leaping to the street.

Before Nels could lay a restraining hand on McMullen, he, too, vaulted lightly out of his seat and stood facing the teamster, who towered above him at least six inches. Panting with fury, the teamster jumped forward with a vicious right swing.

McMullen's head bobbed swiftly to one side as the fist whizzed over his shoulder, his legs shifted, his left arm flashed out to the other's body, and with a grunt the huge teamster doubled with pain. Then McMullen's right fist shot out, there was a sharp crack as it landed against the French-Canadian's jaw, and like an axed bullock he fell forward on his face.

The crowd raised a spontaneous cheer and a large red faced man with a black, drooping moustache, a heavy watch chain looped across his checkered vest, ran out into the street and enthusiastically wrung McMullen's hand.

"Say, young fellow," he cried excitedly, "that was a beauty. I haven't seen a prettier knockout since old Fitz retired. You must be a fighter."

"I ain't no runner," Elbows answered non-committally, as he climbed back on his wagon seat beside Nels.

"You come in and see me sometime," the other persisted. "I'm Jack Slavin. I own the Northern Saloon. I pull off a fight once in a while. I might make things worth your while."

"I'm farming now," ungraciously interrupted McMullen. "Giddap." He slapped the lines against the horses' rumps and swiftly pulled away. He half feared old Nels' displeasure.

SOMEWHAT to McMullen's surprise, old Nels waxed enthusiastic over his exploit.

"By Yimminy! You did just right," he said half dozen times on their return drive to the farm. "By Yimminy! You're an awful strong man for such a little fellow. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"I used to be a fighter, Nels," Elbows confessed with a sudden burst of candor.

After all, he thought, he might as well "come clean" with his future father-in-law.

"What! You were a prize fighter?" demanded Nels, incredulously.

"Yep, I was a prize fighter, Nels—just that," said McMullen.

"Why did you give it up? I thought—"

"Nothin' in it, Nels. Easy come, easy go. All fighters end up broke. That's why I came to the country. I want to settle down—to get me a farm of my own—to marry, perhaps if the right girl will—"

"By Yimminy! You're a sensible fellow, Mike," Nels interrupted. "You're right, by Yimminy! That's what I tell Freda—this quiet life is best. Young people should stay on the farm, they will be happier."

McMullen wondered somewhat at old Nels' sudden heat on this subject and he wondered again, when they reached the farm why Nels, in telling Freda of his victory, should place such emphasis on what he had later said about the undesirability of a prize-fighter's career. Freda made no comment at the supper table, but later in the evening, when the chores were done and her father had gone to bed, she surprised Elbows by asking him to tell her about his ring experiences.

It was the first opportunity he had had for a real conversation with Freda and he was delighted by her keen interest in his stories. It was late in June. In that northern latitude the twilight was prolonged for hours and it was Freda's habit to sit on the porch sewing long after both men retired. Now, with her more than tacit consent, McMullen began to linger with her, sitting on the porch steps near her feet, smoking an occasional pipe—for old Nels' scorn long since had induced him to give up cigarets.

They were magical nights for McMullen. The moon silvered the restless tree tops and bathed field and pasture in its golden radiance. The fairy lanterns of the fireflies flickered to and fro over the marsh meadow. The murmur of the wind in the pines, the call of the night birds, the lowing of the cattle in their stanchions, and the shrill, eerie piping of the bull frogs mingled in a symphony that touched his soul with a gentle melancholy and seemed to wash away the evil sophistication of his past. Something spiritual was born in the man; for the first time in years he really lived.

He had always been a sport, a spender and a ladies' man, but he never had encountered a girl like Freda, nor had he ever truly loved before. Now he found himself strangely diffident, almost boyishly bashful in her presence. He was sick with longing, yet he shrank from making the first overtures and feared—as he never had feared anything before—that she might repulse and ridicule his love.

Yet he was artful and in this emergency his cunning did not wholly desert him. In her whole life Freda had never been fifty miles from this backwoods farm where she had been born. Her knowledge of the great outside world was gleaned mostly from old tattered magazines that chance threw her way and an infrequent visit to the movies at Grand Rapids, the country-seat metropolis of 5,000 inhabitants, the center of the logging industry in the great north woods.

It would have been strange indeed if such a glib tongued globe trotter as Elbows McMullen could not have enlisted the interest of this simple wood's girl. For he, surely, had lived—not wisely, but too well.

Ten years before he admittedly had been the best welter-weight fighter in the world. He missed the championship only because the champion would not meet him—until it was too late. Fondness for whisky had proved his downfall. Several unexpected defeats, in which his backers lost heavily, left him without a following to demand in his behalf battles with the leaders in his division.

Even with his stamina impaired by indulgence, his uncanny defensive skill—which had earned him the name Elbows—and his powerful punch made him a foeman to be reckoned with. He always provided action in the ring and soon he became the "trial horse" of the division. Top notchers wishing to be rid of importunate challengers always advised them to fight McMullen first and many a lusty young "comer" saw his championship hopes wrecked on the sharp promontories of McMullen's elbows.

In fact, even after he had been defeated by the champion, he beat so many good men that he found it increasingly difficult to get matches. It was realized that he had no future—his youth had run to waste in a sink hole of dissipation. Consequently there was neither profit nor glory in beating him and few of the would be champions cared to risk their futures in the attempt.

His ring engagements became few and far between and that was when he first agreed to "fix" a fight. It proved profitable, so he fixed another. In the next few years he "flopped" so often—usually to men whom he could put out in a punch—that he was derisively known as "The High Diver" and big city fight fans no longer would pay to see him perform.

Then perforce he became a barnstormer and took to the sticks. Fighting under an assumed name more often than his own, always ready to serve as a "ringer," or to "take a high dive for the price" he became a roving hanger-on of the underworld and his sole remaining ambition was to drink enough whisky to drown the memory of what he once had been.

He had traveled north and south, from coast to coast, had even fought in London and Dublin in his heyday, had wined and dined with actresses, been patronized by wealthy club men, swaggered along Broadway with the best of them, squandered a sizable fortune before he was twenty-five, and now he had come to this.

Yes, he could tell tales, this fighting man. His greatest difficulty lay in expurgating his narratives to fit the chaste ear of this wondering maid.

Night after night he spun his tales and she listened avidly, prompting him with questions, showing a surprising interest in the details of his ring battles. So must have Othello sat at the feet of Desdemona, but, unlike the mighty Moor, poor McMullen faced the difficult task of reconciling his pretensions with his present conditions. Stultified and inhibited by the very depth and sincerity of his passion, he clumsily tried to bind her in a chain of romance. He did not feel he was making progress. He held her interest, certainly, but she always eluded his efforts to put the conversation on anything but a purely impersonal plane.

HOWEVER, one night, when the rustling corn leaves were silvered by the soft moonlight, McMullen, his battered features flushed, reached for Freda's hand in the darkness and stammered out a proposal. Freda gently withdrew her hand and told him plainly but kindly that she loved another.

"Who is he?" McMullen demanded incredulously. She had not been away from the farm since he came to work there. More than once he had wondered, doubted if he could win her love, but never had it occurred to him that she might love another. "Who is he?"

"Kid Crawford. He's a fighter, too," she added.

"A fighter?" he echoed.

"He's working on the river this summer, but he's the best man on the Mississippi and he's going to be a regular fighter."

McMullen's heart sank. He knew now why she had asked so many questions about his ring combats—and particularly his earnings.

"I think it would be fine to travel around the country and to make as much money as you said," she interjected. "Kid wants me to marry him this fall, but it makes father wild. He says Kid is a no good loafer."

"You better be sure your sweetheart is a real fighter," interrupted McMullen bitterly.

"Oh, he's a wonderful fighter," she cried. "Why he's even stronger than you are, Mister McMullen."

As he stumbled to bed that night, McMullen was resolved to quit the farm on the morrow, but the sight of Freda hovering about the breakfast table the following morning soon melted his resolve. After all, he loved her devotedly. Life without her seemed hardly worth living and when Elbows McMullen was "fighting on the level" he had never been known to quit.

McMullen now shrewdly set about to win the support of her father. She had told him plainly enough that Nels opposed Crawford and Elbows determined to capitalize on this fact. With considerable diplomacy he addressed himself to the guileless old Norwegian. Often he dwelt upon his desire to settle down on a farm. When Nels' mind was thoroughly prepared he came out directly and said he loved Freda and lamented that she did not seem to return his love.

"She thinks she loves that no good Kid Crawford," said Nels with an expressive grunt. "By Yimminy, if I see him 'round this place I'll sic the dogs on him. She won't marry him, Mike. You wait. Maybe she'll change her mind. Women are like that. You are a good hard working fellow, Mike. You'll make her a better husband than that lazy loafer. You wait and we'll see."

McMullen's despondent spirits soared once more. After all, Freda was a dutiful daughter and Nels, thoroughly imbued with the old country idea that matrimonial alliances should be directed by parents, was not lacking in determination. It might take time, but Elbows began to believe that his persistency would win in the end.

McMullen continued to cultivate Freda's society every night, but now cunningly, he emphasized the hazards of the pugilistic profession, and Nels, who often sat up with them at Elbows' suggestion, would gravely nod his head in approval.

"Yes, that's right, Freda," he would say. "You listen to Mike now. He knows."

Freda listened but she did not appear to be convinced. She really loved her burly young riverman. Crawford had been born on an adjacent farm and they had known each other from childhood. On countless occasions he had carried home her books from the district school they had attended together and instinctively she shuddered whenever she compared the dark, surly handsomeness of her lover to the older, battered McMullen. Of this she said nothing, but the blandishments of Elbows, and the counsel of her father failed to shake her secret determination. Yet, outwardly, she appeared submissive and McMullen began to hope once more.

"You wait," Nels continued to advise McMullen, "she'll come 'round finally. Maybe that Kid Crawford'll get licked some day. Then she'll forget him. You see."

So matters stood late in June when the county seat weekly arrived at the farm, the entire two columns of its front page blazoning forth the attractions of the coming Fourth of July celebration, "the biggest and grandest series of events ever held in Grand Rapids." And the leading feature of the program, the culmination of a day of oratory, foot racing, baseball games, log-rolling contests and other sports, was to be "a twenty round scientific glove contest between Kid Crawford, the pride of the upper Mississippi, and Big Bill McPartland, the well known professional from the Twin Cities, who will spar for a purse of $1,000."

McMullen gave a low whistle of surprise as he read the announcement and handed the newspaper to Nels, who adjusted his steel rimmed glasses and slowly spelled out the account.

"Well, maybe he'll get licked," Nels grunted.

"I dunno," McMullen answered morosely. "This Bill McPartland ain't so much. He's only a ham and egger. I wish it was me. I'd stop this Kid's clock for him. I'd make him jump out of the ring."

"Kid's a pretty tough fellow," the old Norwegian judiciously replied. "He's almost as big as you are, Mike."

"But he hasn't got my elbows," snapped McMullen.

Freda evidently had seen the announcement or had had prior word from her lover, for she obviously was excited at supper and after she had cleared away the dishes and joined the men on the porch, she blazed into open defiance when old Nels referred to the newspaper account and sternly told her he never would permit her to marry a prize fighter.

"Won't I?" she cried. "Well, try and stop me. I'll marry a fighter and it won't be any 'has-been' either." McMullen silently winced.

"Kid and I are going to get married after he wins this fight. That thousand dollars is what we have been waiting for—and I'd like to see you stop me—or you, either, Mister McMullen." She flung away to her room.

"I'd like to stop *him,*" said McMullen, his fists clenching convulsively.

"Wait," said the phlegmatic old Norwegian. "Wait Mike, just wait. She'll change her mind maybe—and maybe Kid'll get licked and then there won't be any thousand dollars. Wait I tell you. Everything will come out all right. You'll see."

THE morning of July Fourth came at last. Nels and Freda and Mike were going to drive in to attend the festivities. Every farmer and riverman for a hundred miles in every direction would be present. It was the gala event of the year for this little backwoods community. The cattle had been fed and McMullen was in the barn harnessing the team when he heard the unaccustomed roar of an auto exhaust in the barnyard and an instant later two men strode through the barn door. He instantly recognized one of them as Jack avin, the Grand Rapids saloon keeper ho had spoken to him the day he had ocked out the teamster for abusing his rses some weeks before.

"This is the fellow," began Slavin with- t any preliminaries, motioning towards lcMullen.

"Yeah?" said the other, favoring Mike ith a hard stare.

"He's got a kick like a mule," said avin. "Beggars can't be choosers, any- w. It's either this fellow or call off the ill."

"What's the game, gents?" asked Elbows.

"Pete Hanlon here and me are promoting is fight in the Rapids tonight—I guess u heard of it—between Kid Crawford d Bill McPartland. Well, we just got telegram that McPartland's train ran into e ditch down near Cloquet. His shoul- r's bunged up—and anyway he couldn't t here in time now."

"Well, we've sold three thousand dollars tickets and we've got to get some one to ght Kid or give 'em their money back. I membered seeing you knock over that g teamster that day in the Rapids. I ed you up as a fighter then and when we t in this jam, I told Pete here that maybe u could make some kind of a showing— ough to save our faces, anyhow."

"You want me to fight Kid Crawford?" emanded McMullen with open-mouthed credulity.

"That's the ticket," said Slavin, "if u—"

McMullen gave one wild whoop and rned a handspring on the floor. Say," shouted, "It's too good to be true. Why, l—"

"But can you fight?" demanded Hanlon. That's the —"

"I could once, pal, and you'll think I ll can after you see me tonight."

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Hanlon.

"Mike McMullen."

"What?" shouted Slavin. "Elbows Mc- ullen—the High Diver?"

"Yeh, Elbows McMullen—but not the gh Diver any more. Your friend Bill rawford'll do the diving tonight, pal."

"By God! I knew you was a fighter en I saw you land that punch," ex- imed Slavin. "Well, you've got enough f to make a showing anyway. But no lling tonight. You won't get a penny if u don't stay ten rounds. We've got to give them lumberjacks a run for their money or they'll give *us* a run—for our lives."

"Winner takes all suits me," McMullen answered succinctly, "and I'll bet you a couple of hundred on the side that I stop that stiff."

"Big talk," said Hanlon, "You could fight once, all right, I guess there's no doubt about that, but can you *now*—that's what I want to know."

"Look," snapped McMullen. He was standing opposite a hundred pound sack of wheat. The stout gunnysacking was stretched tight by the bulging grain. "Look," he repeated, and shifting, drove his right fist against the sack. As he withdrew his fist a trickle of grain showed where his blow had split the sack.

Hanlon whistled in amazement. "You can sock all right," he admitted.

"Yes, and I want to sock that stiff of a Kid Crawford worse than I ever wanted anything in my life," said McMullen. "I'm your man. Get me some fight togs and I'll be on hand tonight. You can absolutely count on me and I'll bet some of my own money like I said. But winner takes all, remember. I'm going to insist on that."

"Suits us," said Slavin, "and I guess it'll suit Kid Crawford when he finds we've dug up a farm hand as a substitute."

"Tell him on what *farm* you found me," said McMullen, "and I'll guarantee he'll try to make it a real fight, too—as long as he lasts."

Nels and Freda were standing on the porch as the automobile roared away down the lane and McMullen came striding from the barn to the house.

"What did Jack Slavin want?" Nels demanded.

"He wants me to fight Kid Crawford tonight—the other pug busted his shoulder —and I'm going to fight him."

"What!" Freda cried incredulously "Fight Kid Crawford? Why he'll kill you!"

"Don't you worry none about *me*," McMullen answered, "I'll—"

"I'm not worrying about *you*," she retorted. "I hope he—"

"Ah, I've forgotten more than that big bum'll ever know," said McMullen with a sneer. "I'll show him whether I'm a has-been. I'll teach you to play me for a sucker. It's all coming out of his hide tonight."

For a moment she stared at him, round-eyed, defiant. Then the venomous certainty of the man shook her own confidence in her lover and instinctively her hand clutched her heart. Then suddenly she turned and ran into the house.

"You beat him, Mike. Now's your chance," advised Nels. "But he's bigger than you and Kid Crawford always was one hell of a tough fellow."

"You give me the hundred and eighty bucks you owe me," said McMullen. "I'm going to bet every cent of it on myself. That shows how tough I think he is."

Nothing more was said about going to town for the afternoon's program. Nels sat on the porch, smoking nervously, Freda kept to her room, and McMullen lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, resting for the coming encounter.

NELS CAME in about seven o'clock. "I'll take you to town, Mike," he announced and went out to the barn to hitch up. Ten minutes later McMullen heard the team in the yard and started down the hall. Suddenly the door of Freda's room was flung open and she stood confronting him in the narrow hallway, eyes reddened from weeping.

"Mike," she began.

"It's pretty late in the day for you to begin 'Mikeing' me," he answered angrily, trying to push past her. She laid her hand on his arm.

"I heard you ask my father for your back wages and say you were going to bet on yourself. You—you must be—"

"Pretty sure I'm goin' to win," he interrupted. "You've got the right hunch, girl, and don't forget that thousand dollars you was counting on to get married. I'm going to win that, too."

"You two shouldn't fight," she cried.

"He's the one guy in the world that I want to fight and believe me, I'll fix him so he won't want to fight again."

"Oh, he never intended to fight again, anyway," said Freda with a sob, "I was lying to you about that. He promised me this would be his last fight—but we wanted that purse—so he could buy a farm."

"I'll be the one that buys that farm for you," said McMullen shrugging away her detaining hand.

"Please—please," she appealed desperately, catching his arm again. "Ple don't."

"Come on, Mike," interrupted Ne voice from the yard. "We'll be late if don't hustle."

"Mike! Mike! You said you lov me!" Freda cried, but shaking off h clutching hands, McMullen clattered dow the stairs and climbed into the buggy beside Nels. And although her last impa sioned appeal seemed to be ringing in h ears, McMullen found himself tremblin with eagerness and anger and grinding hi teeth in a jealous rage as Nels urged th team towards Grand Rapids.

McMullen sensed the dangerous tempe of the crowd the moment he left his dres ing room to walk down the center aisle the circus tent to enter the ring, bordere by a double row of flaring, smoking gas line torches that made the canvas enclosu hotter than a Turkish bath house. The were no ordinary small town spectato favoring the local fighter, but sportsman content to see the best man win. The were fanatic in their partisanship, su picious of the imported professional and a McMullen stood in his corner looking ou at the circle of cruel, unfriendly faces, h could see that many of them were inflame by drink.

Word had been noised around that th advertised pugilist had not appeared an a substitution had been made at the las moment. Some of the spectators wer muttering "Fake" and McMullen coul feel their hostility. They felt they migh be cheated of the bloody spectacle the had paid to see and if that proved to b the case Elbows knew their wrath woul turn against him.

"We'll ride you out of town on a ra unless you give us a run for our money," cried a drunken riverman, leaning his fac inside the ring.

"Don't worry, you'll see a fight, bo," snapped McMullen. He was cool now a he waited for the first sight of his rival.

"Five to one kid Crawford licks ye," yelled another riverman, flourishing a ro of bills.

"Here's a hundred and eighty that say he don't," answered Elbows, untying th handkerchief which contained the nin twenty dollar gold pieces, his back wag handed to him by Nels on the way t town. There was a sudden lull in th ult. This novel spectacle of the strange hter backing himself allayed their belief t an "easy mark" had been substituted.

"Good work," whispered Jack Slavin, o was to referee. "And for God's sake, ve them a run for their money or they'll ll the tent down—and you'll be under "

"Don't worry," McMullen assured him. ain't been in such shape for years and is is one fight I'm going to win."

A roar of greeting suddenly went up om the crowd and McMullen turned to e his opponent climbing through the pes in the opposite corner, smiling easily he acknowledged the cheers of his supporters. He was at least fifteen years ounger than McMullen. Stalwart but the, his heavy muscles flowing smoothly der his bronzed skin, his feet were ffling in nervous exuberance and the rbidding glare that he directed towards cMullen showed plainly enough that reda had told him of Elbows' unwelcome urtship.

They were a strange contrast, this good-oking dark-haired youth and the blond teran with his battered features and Mc-ullen felt a stab of jealous rage, a pang envy, as he noted Crawford's handsome atures and vibrant energy.

"Ten to one on Crawford," some one outed and there were no takers. Mc-ullen smiled grimly. He knew the odds re fair—but they should be on him. He d learned his trade in two hundred oody battles and he had contained cer-in belief that no novice in the world uld beat him provided he was in condi-n and three months on Nelson's farm d tempered him to a fine fighting ef-iency.

"Crawford don't want to shake hands," vin whispered.

"Suits me," said McMullen.

The announcer climbed into the ring and llowed his introductions. Both fighters d donned the gloves and stripped off eir bathrobes and stood waiting in their ners as Crawford came bounding across e ring.

Fighting was an adventure to Crawford, was a profession with McMullen. There s no trick known to pugilism that he d not practiced, none of its technique at ich he was not skilled. As the younger n rushed with a flurry of savage blows, the veteran went into his shell backing away with no vulnerable point exposed and occasionally stabbing his opponent with a stinging straight left.

Ducking, blocking, sidestepping, his crouch protecting his body, an elbow always interposed before his jaw, McMullen apparently was being buffeted about the ring before a storm of damaging punches, but as a matter of fact he was never reached in a vital spot. He was quite content to let the younger man force the fighting and his own occasional punches were only meant to tantalize Crawford to renewed efforts.

McMULLEN had tamed these strong, savage, rushing youngsters before and he also knew how to give a crowd a run for its money. When the youth had dulled the keen edge of his fighting fury Elbows would do his stuff. Cool and watchful, his beady and unblinking eyes timing every blow with uncanny accuracy, his earlier rage under perfect control, conserving every resource, the veteran avoided Crawford's rushes as easily as the skilled matador eludes a bull and like the matador he gave his opponent no rest, crowding in whenever the pace slackened and stirring him to fresh flurries with cunning, calculated blows. Crawford was panting and angry when the first round ended, but McMullen was not even breathing hard and the parting of his hair was unruffled, yet he had forced the fighting so that the crowd was cheering wildly and thinking the younger man was hammering the veteran all over the ring.

Round after round passed in much the same fashion. Crawford was worried. He realized that the older man was blocking his smacking blows with forearm and elbow, or rolling his head to rob them of their weight, but he drew on his splendid stamina and increased the pace, hoping to beat down the veteran by the sheer fury of his attack. It was like sparring practice to McMullen. In fact, his judgment of distance and timing were improving as the fight progressed for at first, through lack of boxing, he had been a trifle rusty. His wind was good, his legs showed no signs of weakening and now he was whipping home an occasional short punch that rocked Crawford to his heels.

Elbows felt he could win now in any

round that he chose but he was in no hurry. It would be dangerous to knock out the local favorite at too early a stage; he must give the spectators their money's worth. Also, an early knock out would be too merciful. McMullen had determined to chop Crawford to pieces before he administered the final blow and therefore he was content to weaken his man by slow degrees.

Few of the spectators sensed the real situation. Most of them thought Crawford's blows were landing and they cheered and yelled in a wild frenzy to encourage their local favorite. Only the referee and Crawford's seconds realized the truth and they were encouraging their fighter to renewed efforts knowing now that his only hope of winning was to floor McMullen with a wild swing.

Two rounds more passed and then, shortly after the gong, when Crawford started a desperate flurry, McMullen dropped him cleanly with a short right chop to the jaw and when the youth climbed groggily to his feet, backed him into his own corner with a sickening tattoo of body blows.

"Good for the old fellow," yelled a shrill voice followed by a roar of applause. McMullen's skill and aggressiveness were earning him the reluctant admiration of the spectators. The ranchers and farmhands about the arena started cheering him, mildly at first, with apprehensive glances at the rivermen, but now even the lumberjacks were bellowing their approval.

It was a long time since Elbows McMullen had been cheered for winning a fight or even making a gallant losing stand and it acted upon him like the smell of gunpowder to an old war-horse. His eyes brightened, he increased the tempo of his fighting and consciously added power to his punches. Crawford was tiring, although he still slugged wildly in furious rallies, but now Elbows was standing toe to toe and matching him blow for blow. Even the dullest of the spectators realized that the veteran held the advantage when twice in the twelfth round he drove Crawford to the ropes with a bombardment of vicious body blows and now the roar from the crowd was incessant and deafening.

It was music to McMullen's ears and the contagious excitement seemed to fire him with fresh energy. He grinned confidently at his seconds as he leaned back in his sto between rounds, legs and arms extende drawing deep draughts of air into his lung It seemed like old times, he was hi younger self again. All his former ski seemed to come back unconsciously, ou of the past and the remarkable vitality o his youth seemed restored and unimpaired

He began trying the old tricks that ha made him famous in his prime; the puzzling left shift to the body, the cunnin short uppercuts in the clinches and th jarring "one-two" punch that had brough him so close to the championship. Hi muscles seemed to obey his mind automatically without a conscious effort of hi will. To see an opening was to have hi gloved fist flash to the spot. Once he bea his opponent clear across the ring with a trip hammer volley of short, straight left to the jaw and then dropped him for th count of eight with a savage smash to th heart as he rebounded from the ropes.

Ah, he had used that trick on the champion and floored him, too, in the early rounds of their battle—before his stamin weakened. But he was not weakening now and the thought flashed through his mind that tonight he could beat the old champion and the new one too. If he had only taken care of himself, he would have beate the champion that fatal time and have bee champion still.

He could do it yet—stage a come bac —surprise his old friends who had lon since lost sight of him and startle th sporting world. Why not? He was a good as he ever was and at his best he had been unbeatable. This fight would be th first step in his campaign—from now o he would fight on the level.

He was boxing brilliantly and swiftly, always crowding Crawford and forcing a sizzling pace, but his motions were auto matic, mechanical, operated by that par of the brain that guides a sleepwalker. Even as he slipped punches by a hair' breadth and fended off Crawford wit stabbing blows, his thinking mind wa busy reconstructing the past and layin plans for the future.

Fight fans everywhere would marvel a the reappearance of a rejuvenated Elbow McMullen. His old backers would floc to him once more. He would be floode with offers of matches. Money would ro in again. He—

HIS dreams dissolved in a flash of flame, like the crash of colliding constellations, and he found himself rolling on the padded canvas with the bitter taste of rosin on his torn and bloody lips. Dazed, his muscular control disorganized, only his fighter's instinct functioning, he groped and pawed with the aimless grotesque motions of a crawling baby until he found himself on his hands and knees. There was a roar of a hurricane in his ears; the ring floor seemed to pitch and sway; but clear as a bell through the tumult he heard someone counting and raised his sagging head.

Jack Slavin was bending over him, his right hand rising and falling, his left arm restraining Kid Crawford, who, with blazing eyes and contorted face, crouched at his elbow like an animal ready to spring. And then McMullen realized he had ducked into a wild right swing.

Reeling, sick, groggy, McMullen lurched erect on unsteady legs, but some cool central intelligence told him to dodge behind the referee as Crawford sprang forward. This gave him an added second's respite to clear his addled brain and as the youth rushed with a wide swing, McMullen stumbled into a clinch.

"You'll never marry Freda, you dirty bum," Crawford said to him in his ear. They were the first words he had spoken during the fight. "She said she'd kill herself first, but I'm goin' to kill you."

A gust of consuming fury shook McMullen. Summoning every resource, he smashed home a savage uppercut just as Crawford tore loose and then grunting as he struck driving punch after punch, Elbows backed him into a corner and battered his face into a bloody smear until he heard the gong clang and the referee and seconds tore them apart.

"What round is it?" McMullen asked as he slumped into the stool in his corner.

"Nineteenth comin' up," said his chief second, a bartender delegated to the task by Jack Slavin.

Where had he been? The last round he remembered was the thirteenth. He must have been fighting in a dream until that fluke punch awoke him. He suddenly felt old and tired. Was it Kid Crawford's lucky punch? Or had Elbows McMullen blown up? His head was still whirling, yet he knew Crawford was in worse shape. Two rounds more! He still had time to win—this last fight—only that—all the rest were dreams—including Freda for even as he had savagely slugged Crawford in that last furious rally he had realized with disheartening conviction that he had lost the girl forever. Every blow that he struck the youth would take her further from him. She would love his rival all the more for this beating. The gong cut short his reflections as he mechanically arose and shuffled towards the center of the ring.

Crawford rushed him—where did youth get its limitless endurance—but boxing warily, McMullen circled and feinted and then suddenly landed his once famous one-two punch. Crawford went down, but rebounded to his feet again like a rubber ball, though blind, bleeding, beaten, and there were cries of "Stop it! Stop it!" as Elbows hammered him along the ropes.

Suddenly weary from his own efforts, McMullen pounded at the bobbing gory face before him. Again Crawford went down, but again his indomitable will brought him to his feet and with sagging knees, half propped in the angle of the ropes, his bleeding lips mumbled defiance even as Elbows showered home his punches.

"You can't stop me, you can't, damn you!" the youth taunted.

McMullen slugged desperately, but to no avail. He had blown up. His arms were heavy, his legs were sagging and his lungs laboring for breath. Crawford seemed helpless, but the power had gone out of McMullen's blows. Cunningly, he fell back to husband his strength until the opportunity came for another "one-two" punch. Surely that ought to finish him.

He must knock out Crawford. McMullen knew he was entitled to a decision on points, but the referee probably would favor the local man for Slavin's saloon depended on the patronage of the rivermen and they had bet heavily on their favorite. Well, he could do it; there was one round more.

Crawford was fighting back now, even rushing on unsteady legs and swinging wild "haymakers" right and left. Even as McMullen blocked and ducked, he felt a certain reluctant admiration for the youth's unconquerable courage. McMullen always had hated to punish a game fighter. He hardly looked upon Crawford as a rival now. He grudged him nothing but his youthful grit and endurance. Elbows determined to end it in the next and last round as mercifully as he could. Then the gong rang and he found himself in his corner.

"Quick! Give me a drink," Elbows demanded. "No—whisky," he explained as his chief second reached for the water bottle. Seizing the proffered flask in his gloved hand, he threw back his head and drained two thirds of the contents of the bottle.

Exhausted, close to a collapse, every over-taxed muscle craving stimulant, he could feel the fiery fluid flooding through his veins, replenishing his burnt out tissue, filling him with fresh energy. He knew it would not last, but for the moment he felt as strong as when he had started the fight.

HIS ears were ringing, the ringside faces seemed to swim and blur before his vision, he reeled on his stool until he caught the ropes on either side of him for support. The fumes of the potent whisky creeping through his brain seemed to stir to life a thousand mad, wanton, wild impulses in the recesses of his mind. He felt an exhilarating sense of release and his self-imposed inhibitions vanished like a puff of smoke.

By God! This was what he had wanted! And he had wanted it for months. He knew now. The liquor seemed to touch some spring in his brain and memories of his past, days of excitement and lurid nights, unrolled like a panorama. They were part and parcel of his life, intertwined with his very being and he had been thinking of buying a farm and settling down with this simple country girl.

He knew that the minute intermission had nearly elapsed and he pulled himself to his feet. Swaying unsteadily, he fixed Crawford's corner with his wavering glance. The youth's head was lolling and his eyes were half closed.

McMullen laughed aloud. Oh, he knew he was drunk, but that poor boob there needed just one more finishing punch. He'd give it to him, he was strong enough now, and then Freda could have him. He would leave this God forsaken place, go back to the gay life of the cities where he belonged and take back with him more than one thousand dollars to fitly celebrate his return.

Freda could have the kid, but he'd have the thousand dollars with which she had planned to buy their farm. He laughed again, and as the gong rang charged straight across the ring as Crawford was slowly lifted from his stool.

As he sparred swiftly feigning for an opening, McMullen even felt a sort of pity for Crawford. The poor sap certainly was game, but he wasn't cut out for a fighter and he probably had counted on that thousand dollar purse. Elbows grinned sardonically. Well, he'd take the thousand dollars and the kid could have Freda.

But at the thought of her a sudden jealous rage fired McMullen again. By God he had loved her. He—

The watched for opening and his lightning double punch thudded home against Crawford's jaw.

Crawford went down, but she, Freda, seemed suddenly to appear where he had been standing as she had stood in the hallway a few hours before, barring his progress with outstretched arm. McMullen angrily shook his head to dislodge the film before his eyes. Damn this liquor! He hadn't taken enough. One more punch and then he'd drink, drink, drink forever—drown this memory.

Crawford was up again, but Freda's image persisted. Her face seemed to hover just beyond McMullen's gloves and her voice seemed ringing in his ears.

"Mike! Mike! You said you loved me."

McMullen's head was whirling, but he struck, blindly now again and again, although every blow seemed to hit Freda. Her pleading, reproachful eyes pierced the red mist that filmed his eyes and her hands seemed pulling at his gloves. Yet he struck, and struck again.

Crawford had reeled back into the angle of the ropes and McMullen, strong with the liquor still pulsing through his blood moved forward, his high held right arm poised for the finishing punch. But the image of Freda still intervened.

"Get out o' my way," McMullen cried hoarsely and her shadowy figure vanished like a movie "fade-out." McMullen's eyes were clear now. Something clicked in his brain and he knew himself to be sober again. Slipping forward he coolly measured Crawford for the knockout blow. Then another picture flashed into his mind.

Elbows McMullen had never heard that a powerful personality could project itself across space. If anyone had attempted to explain to him the theory of etheric waves as related to telepathy, he would have said, "Tell it to Sweeney." But he knew that in that moment he could see in his mind's eye a clear picture of Freda crouched by her bed, her eyes red with weeping, her flaxen hair disheveled as she distractedly prayed for protection for the man she loved. McMullen knew she was there, and he also knew the same image was sustaining Crawford.

Dazed, beaten, blinded, the youth, trapped in the corner, put every atom of his energy and every pound of his weight in one last, wild, desperate swing.

McMullen saw it coming. It had started from the floor, but in that instant he knew he still loved Freda. He realized that he was planning to spend on a drunken debauch the purse she had counted on to purchase a farm, and shame, regret for his wasted years, a desire for one worth while act to his credit formed in his mind a flaming sacrificial impulse. In that infinitesimal fraction of a second, he counted the cost and then deliberately ducked squarely into Crawford's random blow and a sardonic grin was frozen on his face as he crashed unconscious to the canvas. Elbows McMullen, the "High Diver," had flopped once more.

As the Duluth through freight ground to a stop at the La Prairie water tank the following morning, a man slipped out of a clump of bushes beside the right-of-way, swiftly scaled the embankment and clambered into an "empty" after a wary glance around for hostile brakemen.

As the train jerked into motion again, Elbows McMullen settled himself comfortably in a corner of the dark box car and pulled out a flask of gin—a relic of the day he had so unceremoniously landed in La Prairie.

"Here's to the biggest sap in the world—myself," he said sourly as he tilted the bottle to his bruised lips. But he was humming a popular song as he carefully replaced the cork. Duluth wasn't a bad little burg and he had five dollars in his pockets—a souvenir of his near come-back—which he found rolled in the lining of his coat that fatal night.

Part Two

The Desert Moon Mystery

An Enthralling Story of a Murder on a Western Ranch

By KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

Preceding events briefly retold

The Desert Moon Ranch, Nevada, is the scene of a mysterious murder. On the ranch at the time is a curious collection of individuals. Each has an important bearing on the story and so we shall list them as follows:

Mary Magin, the middle-aged housekeeper who tells the story.

Sam Stanley, the wealthy owner of the ranch, a mild and lovable giant of a man.

John, his adopted son, an upstanding young man of twenty-five.

Martha, the adopted daughter, twenty-one years old, physically well and attractive but with the mentality of a child of five.

Mrs. Ricker, who came to the ranch to take care of John and Martha. A strange and silent woman.

Hubert Hand, came to the ranch years ago to recover his health and has stayed ever since.

Chadwick Caufield, a born musician, a ventriloquist and so entertaining Sam Stanley won't let him leave the ranch.

The Canneziano twins, Danielle (Danny) and Gabrielle (Gaby), who are alike in face and figure but entirely different in manners, dress and disposition. Danny is quiet, sweet, well bred. Gaby is loud, racy and has a violent temper.

In the past, Margarita, Sam's wife, ran away with an Italian puncher, Canneziano. Sam got a divorce and Canneziano and Sam's divorced wife were married. The twins were the fruit of that marriage and after their mother's death, Sam, although he despised their father, helped the twins financially and otherwise.

At the opening of the story, the girls, now twenty-four have arrived from Europe for their first visit to the ranch since they were eight years old.

The interrelations of the twins with the rest of the household are:

Danny and John are much attracted to each other and in two weeks are engaged.

Gaby openly makes love to John, trying to win him away from Danny but is entirely unsuccessful. John dislikes her as do all the others excepting Hand and Chad.

Hand plays around with Gaby, making idle love to her. She reciprocates in kind. Chad openly and hopelessly idolizes Gaby but she pays no attention to him. Martha dislikes Gaby with a violent childish aversion.

Danny is hurt by Gaby's attentions to John but there seems to be a strong sisterly affection between them. During the girls' two months' stay at the ranch Mary has overheard the twins talking and learns they are hunting for something on the Desert Moon—something connected with revenge. She also overhears Mrs. Ricker tell Hand that she would like to kill Gaby. John himself has told Mary he would like to

strangle Gaby for making Danny unhappy. The air is tense with mystery and suspense.

On the afternoon of July Fourth, when all the help have left the ranch to attend a rodeo, Gaby comes downstairs and goes out, presumably for a walk. Before she leaves she has a short conversation with Chad on the porch. Immediately after Gaby's departure Danny calls to her from the head of the stairs, learns Gaby has left and soon comes down into the living-room herself. The entire household is present in the living-room except: John, who has gone to Rattail to get the mail, Martha who is out feeding the rabbits and Gaby who has just left for a walk.

Martha soon comes in highly pleased, exhibiting a gold bracelet which she says Gaby has just given her. Martha has always coveted this bracelet and up to the present time Gaby wouldn't even let her touch it.

All remain in the house for a couple of hours. Then Mary goes out to start supper. Danny sets the table and brings things in from the kitchen. Mrs. Ricker remains in the living-room and Martha goes to sleep on the sofa. Sam, Chad and Hand go out to the barn to milk the cows.

After their return all eat supper wondering where Gaby is and why John hasn't yet returned from town.

As they are finishing the meal John drives in, going around to the back door and insists on going up stairs to clean up before eating. He remains up stairs quite a while, and when he comes down he refuses any food, saying it is too hot to eat.

By this time all are worried about Gaby. Sam, John, Danny and Mary drive down the road in the car to look for her. Chad and Hand scout around the place on ponies, Mrs. Ricker and Martha remain at home.

After searching an hour or so the two parties are forced back to the ranch, by a heavy shower. While they are closing various windows and doors Mary, the methodical housekeeper, remembers that the attic windows are wide open and she sends Chad up to close them.

Chad goes upstairs and shouts back that the attic door is locked. Mary goes up to investigate. She finds Chad's report is true and Chad goes downstairs to find a key.

Mary, standing there waiting, puts her hand in her pocket for a handkerchief and finds the key. It fits the attic door and she opens it.

About half way up the stairs is Gaby, lying in a huddle. Mary tries to scream but cannot. Then on the red carpet she sees something that shocks her frightfully. Dropped all over a bright beaded bag, lying there, are burned tobacco and ashes from Sam's pipe.

All her horror concentrates into a frantic desire to get those ashes cleared away, she sweeps them up into her handkerchief which she puts in her pocket. As she gets to her feet Chad comes up.

"Call the others," she says, "Gaby is here—murdered!" Then she faints.

CHAPTER XVII

SUICIDE

THE next thing I knew I was lying on my back listening to someone screaming, above the voices of Sam and Mrs. Ricker. I realized that those awful sounds were coming from my own throat. I tried to stop them; but I could not. I put my hands to my throat to make it stop the noise. Sam's voice came, clear and strong then—real, like a light in the dark.

I sat straight up. The screams ceased. "What—" I managed, "is the matter?"

"Everything on God's earth that could be," Sam answered. "But here, Mary. Take this. Get some sleep. Nothing to be done, now. We'll need you, tomorrow. Some water, Mrs. Ricker—"

He shook a powder into my mouth. Mrs. Ricker held a glass of water to my lips.

When I opened my eyes again, it was gray dawn. I saw that I was in Mrs. Ricker's room. She was sitting by the window tatting. Yes, tatting; darting the shuttle back and forth, back and forth, with her long, white fingers. I watched her for a full minute before memory seized me, and I cried out with the pain of it.

"Sh-h-h," she warned me, in a whisper. "You'll wake Martha. She is asleep here on the couch."

I got out of bed, shook my skirts down and fastened my corsets under my dress. I felt in my pocket. The ball of handkerchief was still there. I went into the hall bathroom, washed my face and hands, and drained the last crumb of tobacco down with the water out of the washbowl. I washed the handkerchief, scoured the bowl, and went back to Mrs. Ricker's room.

As I opened the door, she again warned me against waking Martha.

"Was the shock too much for her?" I asked, going and standing beside Mrs. Ricker so that we might talk in whispers. She stopped to pick a knot out of her thread before she answered me.

"I didn't allow her to go upstairs. She followed Chad out of the house and saw him shoot himself. He died within ten minutes. It was terrible for Martha. I had to hold her, while Sam gave her the narcotic—"

"No, no," I protested. "What—what are you saying? Not Chad? What was it you said about Chad—"

"He walked out and shot himself through the head." She pulled the thread looser on her shuttle.

I rushed out of the room, away from her. I staggered down the stairs into the kitchen.

Sam, Hubert Hand, and John all jumped up from their chairs and started toward me. John reached me first, and put an arm around me.

"Chad—" I began, but I couldn't get any further.

"There, there, Mary. Pour her some coffee, Dad. Quick! Here, sit here. Turn on that fan, Hand. Get some water—"

"No, no. Tell me— Mrs. Ricker said — It isn't true. It—it can't be true. Not our Chad—"

Sam answered, gruffly, to keep the choke out of his voice. "It is a damn shame, Mary; but it is true. The boy shot himself not fifteen minutes after we found her. Wait," he went on quickly, "before you think anything. I want to tell you what I have told the others. It is God's truth. That poor boy is as innocent of any connection with the murder as I am."

"Sam!" I managed, and hid my ugly, twisted old face down in my arms.

I will say that the men did pretty well, just sitting quiet, and leaving me alone, and letting me have my cry out. It seemed to me I never was going to be able to stop; but they didn't bother me with comforting, or with protests; they let me get clear through to the sniffling and swallowing stage. I was the first one to speak.

"What," I said, "what are we going to do?"

"We are going to do a lot, Mary," Sam said. "We are going to keep Chad's name clean. Sure," in answer to my protest, "we all know. But, just the same, I'm mighty thankful that I have his alibis for him, myself. A suicide looks bad, you know. That is, it would until we find Canneziano. This is his work—"

"But, Sam," I said, "if he wasn't let out of San Quentin until yesterday morning, he couldn't possibly have got 'way up here that same evening."

"We've told Sam that, a thousand times," Hubert Hand said.

"All right, all right," Sam said. "But

if I ever get that long distance call through, you'll find that Canneziano was released a day or two early. She met him yesterday—"

"How'd he get up here, Sam," I questioned. "You remember there were no tracks on the road except the sedan tracks—"

Hubert Hand snapped me short. "Did you have a passenger up from Rattail, yesterday, John?"

Sam spoke before John could answer. "Son," he said, "did you, by any chance, as a favor to one of the girls, bring that skunk here yesterday?"

"I did not, Dad."

"He got here, then, as I've said all along. Horseback, across the deserts. And he murdered the girl. By God, he'll hang for it, if it takes my last dollar. He killed Chad, too, as much as if he'd shot him down. We aren't overlooking a couple of murders, not here on the Desert Moon. Not right yet. She went out to meet him yesterday, I tell you. She brought him into the house, for some purpose; through the back way and up into the attic."

"Without anybody seeing or hearing them?" Hubert Hand questioned.

"Nobody was looking nor listening, as I remember. You know damn well that, with the doors shut, nothing can be heard from room to room in this house—let alone upstairs to downstairs. I tell you, he killed her there on the stairs, and he made his get-away—"

"If you think that," I said. "Why aren't you out hunting him?"

"Hell!" Sam exploded. "Why ain't I out hunting last night's lightning? The girl had been dead anyway two or three hours—more likely longer, when we found her. He had that head start on us. And he could ride. God, how that skunk could ride; no mercy for a horse! He's gone. He went straight across the deserts, hell bent for Sunday. He'll need food. He'll need water, worse. I've telegraphed to every town within two hundred miles of here. They are watching. I've 'phoned every ranch. I've kept that 'phone hot for six solid hours. I've got posses at every water-hole—"

"Listen, Sam," I said. "You shouldn't have doped me up with that sleeping powder. Because, unless after he murdered her he walked downstairs, with none of us seeing or hearing him, and into the living-room or the kitchen, and put the key in my pocket, Canneziano is not the guilty man."

Sam's pipe fell out of his mouth. I shivered. During all of this talk, I had clear forgotten about those pipe ashes, dropped all over the beaded bag.

It was Hubert Hand who put the question to me about the key. He made me feel guilty. My explanation to them that the key had been in the pocket of my dress, the dress I had been wearing since morning, yesterday, had the feeling of a confession.

"Still," Hubert Hand said, when I had finished, "that does not necessarily disprove Sam's theory. If Canneziano was let out of prison in time to get here yesterday, he could have murdered her, as Sam insists, and he could have given the key to some one of us to put in your pocket. Chad, for instance, or—"

"No!" Sam thundered. "That boy, I tell you, is as innocent as I am."

The telephone bell rang.

Hubert Hand and John followed Sam into the living-room. I stayed where I was. I had to have a minute to think. The ashes on the bag? The key in my pocket? Sam?

"Mary Magin," I told myself, "for twenty-five years, ever since Sam Stanley took you, a snivelling, pride-broken, deserted bride, into his house, and gave you a chance to make a life for yourself, you have never seen him do a mean trick to man, woman, child, or beast. You never even heard of a questionable, nor an unkind action of his. And you never will, for the simple reason that the ingredients for anything but honor and decency aren't in him. If they were, he would not be Sam Stanley, anymore than bean soup would be bean soup if it was made out of gooseberries and ginger. That being the one certainty you have, at this minute, you had better hang on to it tight; stop thinking and guessing; keep your mouth shut; and you won't go far wrong." Good resolutions are easy to make. So is lemon meringue. Both are almost impossible to keep.

I went right on thinking. If Sam, I thought, had found it necessary to murder Gabrielle Canneziano, he had probably done it to keep something worse from happening. Sickened at myself, for that thought I found another way of thinking, not much better.

It did seem to me, remembering the pipe ashes on top of the bag, that Sam must have been there on the stairs at some time after she had been murdered and before I had found her. He must, then, be keeping some secret concerning the murder. It did look as if, considering his talk, he must be shielding the murderer, with every ounce of his horse-sense and ingenuity, both of which he had in plenty. But who would he shield to that extent? Chad, alive or dead? No. Martha? Yes. But Martha could not have done it. John? Not unless there was something more to it than one of us dreamed of. Hubert Hand or Mrs. Ricker? No. Danny? I thought not. Myself? I couldn't be sure.

The men came back into the kitchen. Sam looked ten years older than he had looked ten minutes before.

"It was San Quentin," he said to me. "Canneziano was positively not released from there until nine o'clock yesterday morning."

"That," I said, "lets him out."

"And," Hubert Hand said, "lets every man-jack of us here on the place, in."

Habit was too strong for Sam. " 'Well in,' " he quoted, with a groan.

CHAPTER XVII

CLARENCE PETTE

THE sheriff, the coroner, the undertaker, a newspaper reporter, and another man that the coroner had brought along for a juryman, drove up to the ranch at five o'clock that morning. It had been past midnight before Sam had been able to get hold of one of them at Telko, on account of them all being out taking in the celebration there.

Sam and the sheriff had been friends for thirty years. Sam's money had paid for the coroner's medical education. They, and the others, were mighty sorry to have to bother us at all, and their sole aim was to make as little trouble as possible.

They interviewed each one of us alone, but pleasantly and informally, in the dining-room; each one, that is, but Danny —the coroner, visiting her as a doctor said it would never do to pester her, in the state she was in—, and Martha, who was still asleep, and whom they said it was no use to wake. They kept each of us about ten minutes. They brought in the verdict of died by his own hand, for Chad; and murdered by person or persons unknown for Gaby. They left, on tiptoe, holding their hats in their hands clear to the end of the driveway.

The coroner and the sheriff both came, I think, with the conviction that Chad was the guilty person; but Sam was so right down violent about Chad's innocence, that they let that drop at once.

The sheriff left, I am all but certain, with the strong conviction that I had committed the murder, and with the resolution that he would not do Sam an ill turn by depriving him of a good cook. The coroner and the others, except the reporter, were sure, I think, that one of us was guilty; but were thankful to goodness that they had not found out which one.

The undertaker did not leave with the others. He was preparing the bodies to take them to Telko; there to await the instructions that we could not give until after we had gotten in touch, if possible, with Chad's people, and had come to a decision about Gaby's burial place.

The reporter, whose name—not that it matters except for its fitness—was Clarence Pette, waited to return to town with the undertaker. While waiting, he went snooping about the place, looking for footprints —there could not have been any, after the deluge of rain the night before—cocking his head to one side and the other, writing in a notebook, making knowing, humming sounds between his tightly closed lips. He had been bothering me, like a fly on the ceiling, all morning. Finally, when he came poking right into my kitchen, and opened the door to the back stairway, I turned on him.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "If you have any business, why don't you go about it?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "Precisely. Now, my good woman, if you can spare me a few moments—"

Sam came ambling into the kitchen and threw himself into a chair.

"Ah, Mr. Stanley," Clarence said. "I was just telling your cook here that, if she could spare me a few moments of her time, I probably could be of much service here, under these unfortunate circumstances. You see, we reporters are, necessarily, detectives in a smaller or greater degree. Until I came to Nevada I was on one of the large San Francisco dailies. Not taking undo credit to myself, I will say that while serving there I was instrumental in getting to the bottom of numerous crimes. Have I your attention, Mr. Stanley?"

Sam looked at him as he would look at some snappy puppy that was pestering around his heels.

I don't know what Clarence thought. What he said was, "Precisely. By mere observation. Trained observation, that is, coupled with a naturally analytical and deductive mind, and imagination. Observation, first. As an example: since entering this kitchen, I have observed that your cook—"

"If you mean Mrs. Magin," Sam interrupted, "say so."

"Precisely. I have observed that Mrs. Magin has been but recently divorced. She was married to a man of some property. Of this she received a share, at the time of her divorce, in lieu of further alimony. She has come here, recently, from Chicago, where she lived in comfort, but not in luxury. She did not keep a servant. Her daughters were dutiful girls. All of her children, at the time of the divorce, however, sided with their father."

Sam, who had shifted his position, stretched, and crossed one leg over the other, interrupted:

"Oh, dry up, young fellow," he said, as if the sound of Clarence's voice had tuckered him clear out.

Clarence tittered; embarrassment, I think, made him do it.

"And take yourself and your laughing out of here," Sam said. "If you need to be told that this isn't a place for laughing, this morning, I'm telling you, now."

"But, Mr. Stanley, I assure you—"

"Never mind. Just get on out of here. That's all."

"As you say. I shall report to my paper, shall I, that the millionaire owner of the Desert Moon Ranch is, apparently, undesirous of having the murderer discovered?"

"Report what you damn please to your paper," Sam answered. "But get out of here."

THAT was all right for the Nevada papers, where Sam was known; but, if the other papers copied the news, I didn't care to have that impression of Sam strewn all over the country. It never did do any harm, I reckoned, to have the press on your side.

So, with Sam glaring at me, I cozied Clarence up a bit. Told him to sit down and have some pie and coffee. While he ate I flattered his vanity by asking whether he had formed any opinions concerning the murder.

"Opinion—no," he said, pulling back his chin for dignity. "Theories—yes. Theories, I may say, that I have arrived at quite independently, since the testimony at the inquest was without value. Observation, trained observation, and a certain instinct that might almost be described as clairvoyance.

"For instance: the contents of the bead bag, carried by the victim. Apparently, rather damning evidence, there, against Mr. Hand. Also, apparently, other valuable clues. Pouff—" He made a gesture of blowing the beaded bag and its contents off the palms of his white hands. Since this was the first I had heard of the bag's contents, I was sorry to have them dismissed so airily. I let it pass, not wishing to question him. "Even the coroner, and the other members of the jury, untrained as they were, realized, I am sure, that all that was too obvious. A murderer, my good woman, leaves clues—but not obvious ones. The contents of that bag were probably arranged by the murderer, after the murder had been committed. By someone, moreover, who had access to the victim's personal belongings.

"Regard this, please, as a suggestion merely. Does it occur to you that it is peculiar that a young woman who was unable to meet the coroner's jury, should, in the next hour, be able to arise and assist the undertaker?"

"Is Danny up?" I questioned Sam.

"Teetering around like a sick little ghost. Mrs. Ricker went to ask her about what dress to put on Gaby, and nothing would do Danny but that she get right up and help to lay Gaby out."

"You see nothing extraordinary in that?" Clarence persisted.

Sam made another profane request concerning Clarence's drying up.

"Well," I said, "she is her twin sister, you know. And she is a loving-hearted, unselfish little thing. I reckon she thought it would be the last service—"

"True. True. But! The victim was last seen at the side of the house near the rabbit hutch. Suppose that, as soon as she had gotten rid of the child by giving her the bracelet, the victim had at once re-entered the house, through the back way, and had gone, at once, up these back stairs. Miss Danielle Canneziano was upstairs at the time, was she not? Alone?"

I remembered Danny, coming down stairs, not more than fifteen minutes after Gaby had gone through the room. I remembered how fresh and sweet she had been, and how untroubled, except for her headache. A dozen defenses for Danny, who needed none, flashed through my mind. I should not have deigned to use one of them, to Clarence, but I, unthinkingly, did.

"If you are hinting at Danny," I said, "she had neither the time nor the strength. If she'd had a year, she wouldn't have done it, and couldn't have, with those frail little hands of hers."

"In my opinion," Clarence returned, "that job took science rather than strength. It took fingers that knew how to find the windpipe and the carotid artery at the same instant. The Japs understand that grip, perfectly. An Occidental might stumble onto it by accident. But, granted your objection, that strength was required. The young woman might have had an accomplice. One who, filled with remorse, killed himself. Or one who, in tense excitement, dropped the key into her own pocket—"

I gasped. Sam rose. He took hold of Clarence at the back of his collar, and at the back of his trousers, and began pushing him towards the door.

Sam's first remark won't do to repeat. His second was, "And now, you blithering fool, if you publish one of your filthy, lying insinuations against that little, grief stricken sister, or against our dead boy, or against Mrs. Magin, just one, in that rotten dirty sheet of yours, you won't be in Nevada long enough to get your divorce." Sam boosted him out through the doors.

All the Nevada newspaper accounts made much of the fact that the fiend, who had committed the terrible murder on the Desert Moon Ranch, had made a complete escape, without leaving any clues of any sort.

CHAPTER XIX

THE NOTE

NO CLUES! Land's alive! The place was positively cluttered with clues; and most of them about as useful, in the end, as clutter generally is. I am not saying that none of them were of value. I am saying that a person, out in a grove of aspen trees, all bending and bowing to a high wind, would be sort of simple to go hunting a straw to find which way the wind was blowing. That was about how sensible I was, when I asked Sam, after he had got shed of Clarence, about the contents of Gaby's beaded bag.

"It is all on the table in her room," he said, "where I put it for the coroner's jury. You can go and see. But, first, read this. It was tucked inside her dress. The undertaker found it, and gave it to me. I dread giving it to Danny."

He handed me a folded sheet of paper. I opened it, and read:

> Danny dear: If you ever read this, I shall be dead—murdered. Don't have me buried here in this God-forsaken country. Take me to San Francisco and have my body cremated. I love a flame. I hate the cold earth.
>
> You have had much trouble on my account, old dear. Don't blame me for having kept the fear and the dread of this thing, which I felt certain was going to happen to me, from you. You, nor no living person, but one, could have saved me.
>
> Remember, Dan, that in spite of all the distress I have caused you, and may still be causing you, I have always, in my own way, loved you. Gaby.

"Sam," I said, "I knew she was afraid, yesterday. Oh, why didn't she tell us? Of course you men could have saved her. Why did she go out alone to meet that fiend?"

Sam's only answer was a slow shaking of his bowed head, and a deep sigh.

"Mary," he said, then, "will you give this note to Danny, and explain to her how it is?"

"How what is?"

"I mean— Well, she can't leave the Desert Moon, now, to take the body to

'Frisco. Until we find out who murdered that girl, not a man-jack of us is going to leave this place, for any reason."

"Sam Stanley!" I gasped. "You can't refuse. That's all. Own twin sisters! And Danny as innocent as a new born babe—"

"Don't talk like a book, Mary. Danny may be as innocent as she seems to be, and—she may not. She, nor anyone else, can leave this place until we have gotten to the very bottom of this thing. That goes."

"To think you paid attention to that fool reporter!"

"Don't be a fool yourself," Sam urged. "This note, in Gaby's handwriting, clears Danny of the crime, if all the other evidence didn't, which it does. We know that she did not kill her sister. But, of all the people in this house, she is in the best position to know who did do it. Of course, if she is involved in this, she is involved innocently. If she put the key in your pocket, while we were out in the car, she did it with no idea of what she was doing. Just the same, I want her right here on the Desert Moon for a while. Mary, you take the note to her, and explain, in your nice way—"

"I'll give her the note, Sam," I said. "But you'll have to do the explaining yourself. I'll tell you why. It isn't right for you to try to protect anyone, not even Martha, to the extent of refusing to allow one sister to carry out the dying request of another sister."

Sam dropped his pipe. As I saw the tobacco and the ashes scatter, I was more certain than ever that I was acting as a decent woman should.

The door opened, and Danny came in. She was so pale that her cheeks had sort of a greenish tinge to them. Great dark circles spread far down under her eyes that were red and swollen from crying.

I hurried to her and put my arms around her. She clung to me, and hid her head on my shoulder, and said my name over and over. Sam turned away, as if he could not bear to look at us.

I took her into the living-room, and sat down in a big chair and held her in my lap.

"If only," she kept saying, "if only she could have left us in her beauty. She was so beautiful, Mary. And now—"

Remembering what I had seen the night before I knew that I must get her mind into other channels if her reason was to be saved. I thanked my stars when I remembered the note.

After she had read it, she cried harder than ever; but I knew that it was crying of a saner sort.

"Will you go with me, Mary?" she questioned, when she had quieted some. "To San Francisco?"

"We'll have to talk to Sam about that, dear," I said. It was the habit of helping him, not any kindly impulse, that made me continue. "I am afraid that Sam wants us all to stay here, for a while. There, there, dear. You see how it is, don't you? Sam thinks that the duty of each one of us, right now, is to stay here and help try to find the guilty person."

"Does Uncle Sam think we will find him here?" she questioned.

I tried to tell myself that I had been mistaken; that she had not emphasized Sam's name in a hard, pointed way, as she had seemed to do.

"There isn't anywhere else to try to find him," I said. "Did you know about the key in my pocket?"

She nodded. "I knew about that," she said.

"What else did you know about?" I asked, a mite sharply, for there was no mistaking her emphasis this time.

"Nothing," she said, hurriedly. "Nothing. But, Mary, doesn't it seem possible to you that someone, clear from the outside, did it? And gave the key to Chad, and asked him to put it in your pocket? And that, for some reason we probably never shall discover, Chad could not, dared not, tell on the person who gave it to him? And that that is why he shot himself?"

"And we hadn't thought of that!" I gasped. "I do believe it. It is as clear as day."

Her sudden, definite silence talked as plainly as any words she could have spoken.

"Danny," I questioned, "you thought of that, but in your heart you don't believe it. Do you?"

"I—I want to believe it," she evaded.

"But you don't?" I persisted.

She was silent.

"Danny," I pleaded, "tell me about it. Just tell me, dear. I'll never breathe it to a soul, if you say for me not to. What is it that you know, or think that you know?"

She waited so long before answering me that I thought surely she was finding the words with which to take me into her confidence. I was so disappointed I could have cried with her, when she hid her face on my shoulder again and moaned, "Mary—I can't. I dare not tell. I tell you—I dare not."

She jumped up out of my lap, and ran upstairs as if wicked, dangerous things were running after her.

CHAPTER XX

A CONFESSION

JOHN came into the room. "The outfit is back, or most of it," he said. "Darn their souls! Curiosity, nothing else. But for this, they wouldn't have shown up for two days yet. I think the women went into the kitchen just now, Mary."

There they were, Belle, Sadie and Goldie, all huddled up together like a bunch of something, near the back door. As I came into the room they jumped and screeched. The only thing that makes me madder than being scared myself is to scare somebody else. I spoke to them right sharply.

I told them that I expected them to go about their work, and to act like sensible girls while so doing. I told them that we had enough to put up with just now without adding a parcel of jumping, squealing girls to our load.

Sadie, the sauciest of the lot, on account of imagining that being married made her more independent than the other girls, spoke up.

"We haven't decided yet that we want'a go workin' in a house where a murderer, and maybe more'n one, is livin'."

"If that's the way you feel about it," I said, "the sooner you leave the better. It is an honor to work in the Desert Moon ranch house, and you know it."

"Maybe 'tis. Maybe 'tain't," Sadie sauced back. "You'll not get girls as easy today as you would of yesterday. Murders and suicides—if it was a suicide—don't do much in makin' a ranch pop'lar for help."

"Very well," I said. "If you are going, go now. If not, put on your aprons and get to work."

I could scarcely believe my eyes. The three of them skeedaddled out through the door. I felt sort of sick, watching them go. Not because I'd have to teach new girls the work and my ways, but because their leaving gave me my first realization that the Desert Moon Ranch was darkened by the shadow of sin, that the eclipse I had feared was upon us.

When I telephoned to Sam, down in his office in the outfit's quarters, I tried to keep the truth from him; saying, only that the girls and I had had a spat, and asking him to find some new girls for me.

He came up, in about half an hour, with an Indian girl, not more than fifteen years old trailing along behind him. Answering his nod I went with him into the living-room.

"She is the only one I could get," he said. "We'll have to send to Reno or Salt Lake. None of the outfit want their women folks working here. I don't blame them. The Desert Moon Ranch is disgraced—" He stopped short.

I thought that it was because he could not bear to go on with what he had begun to say; until, following his eyes, I saw that he was looking at a piece of paper on the writing desk just in front of him. It had been propped up against a vase; but it had slithered down into a curve. He reached for it; read it, and handed it to me.

> I killed her. Chadwick. P. S. Sorry to put you to the trouble of disposing of me. Make it cheap and snappy. I haven't a relative in the world. P. G.

"A lie," Sam said.

"I think so."

"I know damn well it is. I tell you she had been dead two or three hours anyway—probably longer—when we found her. Listen, Mary. Between four and five o'clock—we all saw her alive at four—Chad sat right there at that piano, and he never left it once. Did he?"

"No, he didn't. I kept thinking he would, to join Gaby. But he didn't."

"Between five and six o'clock," Sam went on, "he was with me, every minute of the time, down in the barn, and coming up to the house. Never out of my sight. Between six and seven he was with us all at supper. If he'd been gone all afternoon, I'd know that note was a lie; know it just as well as I know it now—"

"But why, why did he shoot himself, then, Sam?"

"God knows. He thought he loved her."

"But this note! A confession! Why would he die in disgrace, when we know he was innocent?"

"God knows. To shield someone else, I reckon."

"Who?"

Sam dropped his pipe.

I heard him stamping the sparks out. I did not want to look down.

CHAPTER XXI

A SUMMONS

"IT MIGHT be," Sam said, as he refilled his pipe, "that Chad did not write this. I'll send it, with some of his other writing, to one of these handwriting experts I've read about."

"He wrote it," I said. "The writing is his. So is the wording. You know it."

I looked at him, straight. I felt something tighten around my heart as if it had been roped by a professional. I guess I was too sentimental. But I couldn't bear to see Sam's good old face all aching with worry.

"Sam," I wheedled, "have sense. We've a confession here that will satisfy the world. He killed her; and, when the body was found, he shot himself. Nothing could be more reasonable. No one would doubt it. We can send this to the papers—he has no relatives to be disgraced, or to sorrow over it—and the Desert Moon will be cleared of crime. One of your favorite sayings, Sam, is to let well enough alone."

Sam drew himself up to the top of his six feet and five inches and looked down from there at me, away down—as far, say, as if I had suddenly dropped into a dirty old cistern. "There is no question of well enough," he shouted, so that I could hear him in my depths, "until the Desert Moon is cleaned, clean, Mary Magin. Cleaned and fumigated, or destroyed. It is not going to be whitewashed. There is someone on this ranch who is as guilty as hell; who knows who committed the murder; who aided and abetted it. We are going to find that person. Then we will find the murderer. They'll be hung together. After that we can leave well enough alone."

"Suppose," I suggested, "that Chad was the accomplice."

"I reckon," he said, growing suddenly kind, "that you've been through too much, Mary. That's it. You aren't quite responsible today. I don't wonder. But reason with me, Mary.

"Somebody suggested, already today, that it was Chad who put the key in your pocket. When did he get the key to put it there? Well, say that he got it between seven and eight o'clock, when he was out scouting by himself. Did he meet some entire stranger then, who asked him to dispose of the key? Did he agree to do it, as a favor to said stranger? Did he, later, shoot himself and leave a lying confession to shield the stranger. The stranger, that is, who had killed the girl Chad loved? Chad did carry some secret to the grave with him, Mary. I am sure of that. But not a secret that we can't discover. We are going to discover it."

To doubt Sam, standing there before me talking so earnestly to me to doubt his honesty of purpose and his goodness, was more than a question of doubting my eyes, my ears, my senses for the moment. It would have been to doubt the things that had made up my life for the past twenty-five years: it would have swept away all of my accumulated certainties, all of my conclusions, all of my standards, as a wind sweeps trash from the desert. It would have uprooted me, and it would have left me as aimless and as wind-tossed as tumbleweeds.

"Sam," I began, resolved to tell him then and there about those pipe ashes of his on the beaded bag. I had waited too long. Mrs. Ricker was coming down the stairs.

"I think," she said, "that Martha should not sleep so late. I fear that she is sleeping too heavily."

"It is a blessing that she can sleep," Sam said. "She is all right. Those sleeping powders are as powerful as all get-out. I got them from a doctor in 'Frisco when I was down there last year, and they made me sleep when I had neuralgia. I'm going up, though. I'll have a look at her.

"By the way," he added, from the stairway, "I want you two ladies to be here, in this room, at promptly three o'clock this afternoon."

"Upon my soul!" I said, when Sam was out of sight. "What do you suppose that means?"

I might have spared my breath. She did not answer. But she did something downright unusual for Mrs. Ricker. She looked at me; and as I met her look, it seemed to me that there was a pleading expression in her face, as if, were she able to talk, she'd like to ask me to do something for her. I have seen dogs look like that, at times.

"What is it, Mrs. Ricker?" I questioned.

She shook her head, and walked to the windows and turned her back on me.

I looked at the straight, gaunt back, and at her long arms hanging at her sides. She seemed frail. And yet she could hold Martha still when Martha was in one of her tantrums, and that was more than I, a much stouter woman, could do. She, with no one but Martha, who did not count, had been alone in the house for an hour the evening before, while the others of us had been out hunting for Gaby.

Sam insisted that Gaby had been dead two or three hours when we found her. But was he certain of that? How did he know? Might he be mistaken? Mrs. Ricker had hated Gaby, as only a jealous woman can hate.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PACT

ALL the while I was getting a makeshift dinner ready, that last thought of mine kept bothering me like the smell of something burning. So, as soon as dinner was over (I need not have bothered with it; everyone straggled in and straggled out again, without doing any justice to good food. Mrs. Ricker and Martha did not even come down), I told the Indian girl, whose name was Zinnia, to manage the dishes the best she could, and I went off up to my room.

I took some dinner on a tray up with me for Mrs. Ricker and for Martha. When Mrs. Ricker opened her door I managed to get the information that Martha was awake at last, and that Mrs. Ricker had just been helping her with her bath.

"Is she all right now?" I questioned.

"I—suppose so." She edged the door shut in my face.

I went into my room and combed my hair. I can always think better when I am doing some absolutely unimportant thing like that. But, today, it was as if someone had put an egg-beater into my mind, and was beating it to best time. My thoughts whirred, and tossed, and foamed.

Sam's pipe ashes. The key in my pocket. Chad's suicide. Chad's note of confession. Gaby's fear. Mrs. Ricker alone in the house. What it was that Danny knew and dared not tell. Not all plainly and separately as they look in writing; but all jumbled, and each one seething with its own details and complications.

Sam's pipe ashes— Lands alive! What had been the matter with me. Sam was the only member of our household who smoked a pipe, but he was not the only man in creation who did; nor was his the only pipe, I supposed, that had ever dropped and spilled its contents. A very nice and comforting thought if I could have fooled myself into believing it.

Try as I might, I couldn't keep from thinking that part of Sam's talk was bluff—that is, soon as I got away from him I thought that. Did it mean that he was trying to shield Chad? No. It could not mean that. Besides, Chad himself had surely been trying to shield someone. Sam? Gaby had feared someone, when she had left the house. No woman had ever feared Sam.

Mrs. Ricker had hated Gaby. But so had John hated Gaby. Mrs. Ricker had said— John had said—

I jumped to my feet, holding my head in my hands. It seemed to me that the only decent thing I could do, since it held my brain-pan, was to wrench the disloyal thing off and sling it away. How dared I think such thoughts of people with whom I had spent the best part of my life? They were the only friends I had in the world. I had never seen one of them do an unkind thing. Never. Not even Mrs. Ricker who was as queer as Dicks' hatband, but she had always been gentle and patient. She had always been the first to spread crumbs on the snow for the birds in winter. Though, of course, she had said to Hubert Hand—I was off again.

I could not endure the thinking of such

houghts. I must stop it. I must find work to do; someone to talk to. I ran across my room and pulled open my door, ust in time to see Hubert Hand straighten rom where he had been stooping to my keyhole.

He brazened it out. "Sorry, Mary. But I guess it will be dog kill dog around here from now on."

"Hubert Hand," I said, "what I want to know is, why are you listening at my keyhole?"

"I wasn't listening. I was looking, or trying to. This keyhole peering is the bunk, Mary. You might as well cut it out yourself." With that he turned and walked on down the hall.

I stood watching him, trying to account for an odd sense of relief that had come to me. In a minute I understood. Since he had been at my keyhole, he must have had some suspicion of me for something. Possibly he had a good reason for that uspicion. As good a reason as I had for uspicioning Sam, and John, and Mrs. Ricker. He was clear off the track with his suspicion. Probably I was just as far ff with mine.

He turned, quickly, and came back to me. He looked up and down the hall. He owered his voice to just above a whisper. "Mary," he said, "I've gone at this all wrong. I'm off my nut today—that's all. I've discovered that I— Well, I guess I cared a lot more for the girl than I thought I did. By God, I believe I loved her. It s hell—having her clear gone. But my anging for her murder isn't going to do r any good; not now."

Horrified I backed away from him. For ne wild moment I thought that the man as confessing to me.

"No!" he said. "Not that! I swear o God I'm innocent. But they are going o try to pin it on me, and they may not ave much trouble doing it. I want to ake a bargain with you. You'll get the est of it, for I know damn well that I'm nocent, and I don't think that you are —entirely. It is this. If you'll keep your outh shut, I'll keep mine shut. Fifty-ifty. Will you do it?"

"Hubert Hand," I said. "I don't know e solitary thing about you that would e of any importance if I told it to the orld. Anything that you think you know bout me I'm glad and willing to have you broadcast, or publish in the papers."

"Sure of that? Sure you are willing to have me broadcast that you found the body; that you didn't scream; that you stayed there, quiet and alone with it for ten minutes, before you gave the alarm?"

Fool that I was, I said, "It wasn't nearly ten minutes. It wasn't more than four or five."

He smiled. I saw what I had done. "It took me that long to discover the truth. I thought she was asleep. I had to run up the steps—"

Double fool, to try to explain.

"Say it took you a minute to run up a few steps. Another minute to discover that she was dead. Should it take you three or four minutes to run down again and give the alarm?"

"I was sick, stunned, dizzy with horror."

"Probably any jury would believe that, all right. Just the same I'll bet it would save you a lot of trouble, now and later, if no one knew anything about your lonesome five minutes, or longer. I'll tell you how I know. I came out of my room at the minute you opened the attic door. I saw you leave the hall to run up the steps. I went on downstairs. Chad was kidding around down there, collecting keys. I didn't know what he wanted with them. Fortunately for you or I'd have said you'd gotten the door open—"

I interrupted with a new, and it seemed to me, a clever idea. "What you are forgetting," I said, "is that I fainted dead away."

"Gosh, Mary, but you are a rotten liar. Don't try it. Sam and I both saw you totter and go down, just as we got to the top of the stairs, after Chad had shrieked the news down at us. That was close to fifteen minutes after I'd seen you open the door."

"And—and," I couldn't keep my teeth from chattering, "you think I killed her, then?"

"Rot! She had been dead for hours. Rigor was complete. No, all I think is that you were—trying to cover someone, maybe. All that I know is that you know more than you are telling."

"I did tell you. I was frozen stiff with horror."

"And you've been lying about it ever since, right here. All right. Tell the jury. Tell them, too, why you came rushing out of your room, as you did just now, white and trembling. Don't like your thoughts, all by your lonesome, do you? Come on, Mary. Be a sport. We are both innocent. But—fifty-fifty? Shut mouth [illegible]r shut mouth?"

His talk about telling a jury scared me. [illegible] heard of third degrees. I knew that [illegible] ever told anyone but Sam himself, [illegible] those pipe ashes, the words would ch[illegible] life out of me, as I would want then. [illegible]

"Do[illegible]og, then?" he asked.

"Hubert Hand, I'm going to be honest with you. I don't know what it is you want me to keep my mouth shut about."

"Don't? Well, I want you to keep still about that conversation you overheard between Ollie Ricker and me in the cabin. She went back to get her parasol and saw you coming out. We knew you had been hiding there in the closet, listening."

With the sense I had been showing, it is a wonder I didn't speak right up and tell him that I had not been in the closet, but in the chest. I did not.

"Lands alive!" I said. "I'd had no idea of telling that, anyway. It was none of my business."

"Fine! I didn't have any idea of telling anything, either. It was none of my business. Shake on it."

I let him take my hand. I said "yes," when he made me promise. I felt like I'd been associating with a sidewinder.

I went on down the hall, wracking my brain to remember exactly what I had heard in the cabin. Mrs. Ricker's threat. That would incriminate her, not him. No; what he was afraid of having told must have been said in the room with the closet. I found slight, but some comfort in realizing that, though I had probably been a fool to make the promise to him, he had probably been a worse fool when he made the one to me.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN OMEN

As I was trying to hurry past Gaby's door, Danny opened it, and asked me if I would not come in and sit with her for a while.

I should have been there long before. I went right in, apologizing, and trying to explain. But, when I saw that she mea for us to sit in Gaby's room, I sugges that we go somewhere else.

"No, please Mary," she said. "I don't want to be alone; but I do want to si here. I feel as if here, with all her thing around me, I might—get in touch—I mea —something might come to me. They say, you know, that people who have died —violent deaths, do not leave the earth sphere at once. I don't know whether believe that or not. But it could be true. If she is still on earth she would come here. Wouldn't she? And she would try, I am sure, to give me a sign. Something to help me—to help all of us. If it should come, I want to be here to receive it."

"It won't come, Danny dear," I said.

"No. I suppose not." She leaned back in her chair and sighed, and her arms dropped straight down over the chair's arms—a position that showed how tuckered she was. The engagement ring that John had given her slipped from her finger and came rolling over toward me. I scrambled to pick it up. When I rose from the floor she had jumped to her feet. She was ashy, shaking and trembling as if she had a chill.

"Mary! Promise me that you'll never tell that, not to anyone. It didn't— It couldn't mean anything."

"It means," I said, handing her the ring, "that you are wasting away. You'd better let me go down and bring you up some good, hot soup; or an eggnog."

She clung to me. "Don't leave me, Mary. I am afraid. I am dreadfully afraid. Promise that you won't tell about the ring. It—didn't mean anything."

I will admit that I did not like it any too well myself. There, just as she was asking for a sign, the ring, which had fitted snugly enough, I had thought, had dropped off. But of course I had to put up a brave front to her.

"Nonsense," I said. "I won't tell anybody, because it is nothing to tell. All that it means is that the ring is too large."

"It is too large," she agreed. "I've been losing weight lately. I have meant to ask John to send it to have it cut down—but I hated to be without it. Still—just as I was asking for a sign. Though it has dropped off several times before this. I shouldn't think it meant anything this particular time, should I?"

"Of course not, dear," I said, relieved to hear that it had dropped off before. "You had your hands hanging straight down, that's all. You are all overstrung, and no wonder. Anyway, what could it have meant?"

How a person will babble along, seemingly for no reason. I had paid no attention to what I was saying; but the minute I had said it the question needed an answer.

It could have meant that Gaby did not want Danny to marry John. Or, since nothing in the house could have signified John's name as plainly as that ring could, it might have meant—I refused to go on.

Danny must have been answering the question to herself as I had been doing. She sat down in a deep chair opposite me, her hands clasped on her knees, and leaned forward and looked into my eyes.

"Definite things, Mary," she said, "are always so wise. A definite answer to your definite question proves, as nothing else might have, that this was a silly, futile little accident. The ring has dropped off, I suppose, half a dozen times this week. Gaby's last note to me was all affection. Living, if Gaby could have taken John away from me, for herself, she would have done it. Dead—she wants us to marry. I know that. As for any other implication—" As I had done, and in spite of her talk about definite things, she refused that. "If only Uncle Sam were not so heartless," she finished.

"Heartless!" I spoke sharply in spite of myself. "If the Creator ever made a man with a bigger heart than Sam Stanley's, nobody ever saw him."

"He has been good to you," she said. "But you give him his own way about everything."

"Well, after all," I said, "he does own the Desert Moon."

"And everyone on it, body and soul," she said. "Sometimes I think he owns everyone in this county."

I did not want to know what she meant by that; so I only reminded her that Sam was John's father.

Her voice, when she spoke next, came muffled from where she had hidden her face in her curved arm on the back of the chair. "Uncle Sam is not John's father," she said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"John is uncle's adopted son. They are so different, so utterly different, they could not be father and son."

"Maybe not," I said, trying to keep pleasant, for I did not want to be snapping at the poor child on this day, "but no real son ever loved his father better than John loves Sam. He all but worships him, and he has ever since he was a little fellow."

"I know. I know. Sometimes I think John cares more for uncle than he does for me. Mary, tell me, honestly. Do you think John loves me as much as he loves Uncle Sam?"

It is hard to explain; but, ever since we had begun to speak of Sam, I had had a fighting feeling, as if I were warding off danger; so I was right down relieved to have the conversation take this silly turn.

"Love," I told her, "though, mercy knows I know little enough about it, can't be measured with a pint cup like flour. But John is a good, normal boy. That means that his sweetheart comes first with him; first and last."

"I—don't know," she answered. "I should hate to have John have to choose between uncle and me."

"That is foolish talk. Why should John ever have to choose between you and Sam?"

She sighed, and shook her head. A sudden certainty came to me. Whatever it was that Danny had refused that morning to tell me, whatever it was that she had said that she dared not tell, had had something, somehow, to do with Sam.

I did not urge her again to tell me what it was. I did not wish to know. I sat there, dumb, trying to think of some decent excuse that would take me away from her and from that room, and from the need of fighting; fighting, not in a fog, but the fog itself, trying to fell nothingness with a blow, trying to catch smoke in a trap. My dull wits worked too slowly. She began, again, to speak.

CHAPTER XXIV

CLUES

"WHAT I can not understand," she said, "is that Gaby knew that she might be killed. And yet, so far as anyone knows, she did not one thing to save herself. If only, only she had confided in me! Surely I could have found some way to help her—to save her."

"You know, dear," I said, "I think that Gaby was not—well, at least not doing any clear thinking, those last few days."

"[illegible] know. I thought it was only her disappointment. But now—who could be quite sane with such a fear confronting her? Yet she left all of her things in order; as if, deliberately, she prepared for death. She burned her papers and letters. See—" Danny pointed to the fireplace.

I crossed the room and looked into it. Papers had recently been burned there. I took the poker and stirred in the fluttering, black bits; but nothing had escaped the flames. I hung the poker back in the rack with shovel and tongs and bellows. It did not catch on its hook. As I bent to fix it I saw a little white circle, down in the corner of the stand. I stooped and picked it up. It was a tiny round of celluloid, with the letter Q printed on it.

"It is one of the caps for her typewriter keys," Danny replied to my question. "She put them on over the keys; softer for her finger tips, or saved her finger nails—something of the sort."

"I wonder why she burned them?" I said.

"Do you think that she did?"

"Well, this one being here on the hearth—"

"It probably rolled there, sometime, when she was taking them off her machine."

"Why did she take them off if she always used them?"

"I don't know."

"Shall we," I suggested, "look and see whether the others are where she kept them?"

Danny opened the desk drawer. "They aren't here, at any rate," she said, and came back to me, and reached out her hand for the little cap, and turned it over in her fingers. "It could mean only," she said, "what we knew before. That she expected death. That she tried to leave everything tidy and in order."

"I don't know," I objected. "It seems more than orderly, to have taken these off the machine and burned them. It seems down right queer."

She smiled a little pitying smile at me, and patted my shoulder. "Poor Mary," she said.

"Well," I tried to defend myself, "in all the mystery stories that I ever read it was always some stray, meaningless little thing that solved the mystery in the end. A criminal never was discovered without any clues, was he?"

"I believe," she said, "that you are the only one in the house who hasn't looked at what Gaby had in her bag—"

She walked to the table by the window. I followed her. I dreaded seeing that bag again; but I was curious about its contents. It was lying limp on the table.

She picked it up, brushed it flickingly with the tips of her fingers, and blew on it, as if she were trying to blow something off of it. "Everything," she explained, "sticks to the little pointed beads."

I took it from her and looked at it closely; but I could see no speck of ash, no minute particle of tobacco, nor of dust on its pattern of parrots, tree branches, and flowers.

"It is a beautiful thing," I said.

"Gaby got it in Vienna."

"I've wondered," I said, "why it was that Gaby had all the beautiful, expensive things, such as this. Your clothes are pretty and tasty, but they aren't near the quality of Gaby's."

She hesitated a moment before answering. "I have been in England for the past eight years, while Gaby has been on the continent, where beautiful things are more plentiful, and cheaper."

"Lands alive! I thought you girls had lived together all these years."

"No," she said, and picked up Gaby's cigarette case, and handed it to me.

It was made of a dull gold, with her monogram, G. C., set in tiny black opals, with green and blue lights flickering in them as if they were alive.

I opened the case. It was full of cigarettes, except for a space at one side where about two of the pesky little things would have fitted in.

"And see," Danny said, opening the gold match-box that was like the cigarette case, "it is quite empty. It doesn't seem reasonable that she would start out with an empty match-box. I believe that she used the matches to smoke the cigarettes."

"She wouldn't have used a box of matches to light two cigarettes."

"She may have shared her matches with another person, who was smoking."

"Likely she had only a few of these short matches," I said. (Sam would use about as many matches as that box would hold to get rid of one pipeful of tobacco.)

I picked up another little gold box. It had powder, rouge, lipstick, and a mirror in it. I had seen it often enough before. I put it back on the table, and took up a beaded coin purse that matched the large bag. It was entirely empty.

"Isn't it queer that that should be empty?" Danny asked. "And her bill-fold is missing. She surely would not start to go anywhere with not a cent of money. Doesn't it look as if she had been robbed?"

"Only," I said, "if anyone had robbed her, why would he have left the valuable gold cigarette case, and vanity case, and match-box?"

"He might have thought they would be hard to dispose of."

I stood silent, thinking and shaking my head.

"Mary," Danny's voice, always low, grew lower still with her intensity, "there is one thing that no one has thought of. Daniel Canneziano could have reached here from California in a few hours, by aeroplane."

"I had thought of that. But, Danny, no aeroplane ever came within twenty miles of the ranch without every man-jack of us hearing it, and rushing out with our heads tipped back to gape at it. Aeroplanes aren't stealthy things, you know, that people can slip up in, and slip off again."

"But, on the third of July, two aeroplanes passed over, going to the Telko celebration."

"On the third," I reminded her, "as advertised. And you know how much noise they made. And how we all went out and watched them, from tiny specks in the south until they were tiny specks and lost in the north again."

She shook her head and dropped her shoulders with a sigh.

I picked up a little red handkerchief. It was crumpled in a ball; if ever I saw a handkerchief that had been cried into, and turned to a dry spot, and squeezed, and cried into again, it was that little red wad. It was dry now, of course; exposed to the air in this altitude. I wondered whether it had been dry when it had come out of the bag. It was a question not to be asked; so I dropped the handkerchief on the table, certain, only, that the fastidious Gabrielle had never started out with a handkerchief in that condition in her Vienna bag, and picked up the carved ivory cigarette holder. It fell to pieces in my fingers.

"Was this broken in her bag?" I questioned.

"Yes. Snapped in two. And she loved it."

I fitted the pieces together again, on the table, and took up a folded sheet of paper, and opened it, and read:

"Glorious Gaby: Be a good sport. Be a darling. Be game—that is, be Gaby, and meet me this afternoon, around four thirty, in the cabin. H. H."

"Well!" I said.

"Yes, I know," Danny answered, "but Hubert Hand swears that he wrote that note several weeks ago. Too, we know that he was playing chess with Uncle Sam at half past four."

"He could have gone to the cabin later, when the men went to do the chores. Or was he right with Sam and Chad all the time?"

"I suppose so. He must have satisfied the coroner's jury, at the inquest, of his innocence. Mary," her voice went all tense again, "does it seem to you that the jury was very readily satisfied?"

Perhaps this would be as good a place as any to explain that this tale is not being written to prove that Mary Magin was, or is, a wise, clever, or smart woman. As I have said before, and will say again, from the beginning to the very end I was a fool. I made mistakes, over and over; and, as will be told, I made a disastrous mistake in the end. If I had been blind, deaf and dumb, I could not have been as big a fool; for then, all the time, I should not have been imagining that I saw things which I did not see; heard things which I did not hear; and I should have been obliged to keep my clattery old tongue quiet. The only virtue I can claim, concerning this story, is that if I were a vain or a conceited person, I should never have written it.

I spoke sharply, too sharply to her in answer to what I had imagined I had seen in her attitude. "Never mind about the jury being easily satisfied. Sam is not going to be. He told me this morning that he would find the murderer if it took every dollar he had in the world to do it. Sam is going to get to the bottom of this. Be sure of that."

"I—wonder," she said.

"What do you wonder?"

"Mary!" she exclaimed, close to a reproach, "I merely wonder whether or not Uncle Sam will succeed."

I looked at her brown eyes, all red and swollen from tears, and at the deep, dark circles under them, and I was ashamed.

CHAPTER XXV

MORE CLUES

I PUT my arm around her shoulders and drew her close to me. "Honey," I said, "forgive your old Mary. We are all overstrung, overwrought. I didn't mean to speak so sharply."

"There is nothing to forgive, dear," she said. "But—I don't understand. What did I say, or do, that made you feel like being cross to me?"

"Nothing," I told her. "I'm all on edge —that's all."

"I know. Were you looking for something else on the table? There was nothing else in her bag."

"I was wondering," I said, "about that foreign letter she got on the second of July. Did she burn it with the other things?"

"Oddly she didn't. I found it in her desk; or, rather, beneath her typewriter. Either she forgot about it; or knew that none of us could read it."

"It was written in a foreign language?"

"No. In code. Here it is."

Code, indeed! When I took it from its envelope, this is what met my eyes.

> "Paexzazlytp; f-y nyx orgrago, rn fgao atf jan j-asn, abzgo zkg c—. abhalo, vkgt nyx clplzgf rg zkg kypulzae, zkaz nyx palf, vlzk brlzazgf r-yta e-lpa prleg, p-yoon, yef fgao, l-rafg—"

I have copied only the first lines on the first page. There were four sleazy pages, all closely typewriten. Not a scratch of handwriting on it. What I judged to be the signature was "Slrsl."

"Do you know who wrote this?" I asked.

"I am sure, if I dare be sure of anything, that it was written by a man named Lewis Bauermont."

I counted the letters of Lewis on my finger. Five. The number of letters in the signature, Slrsl.

"If he signed his name Lewis," I said, "then 'S' would be 'L', and 'l' would be 'e' and so on. Get a pencil, dear. Let's see if we can work it out."

She came and looked over my shoulder at the jumbled letters.

"No," she said, "you see, the letter 's' comes twice in the last word, and there are no duplicate letters in Lewis. I am sure it will be more difficult than any substitution of letters. I don't know anything about codes—but I have a notion that the letters are mere symbols of something else —numbers perhaps, that work out with a key quotation."

"I'm going to have a try at my idea, anyway," I insisted.

I went and sat at the desk. She sat beside me, and handed me a pencil.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the man who wrote this signed some nickname. Did he have one?"

"Men called him 'Mexico,' and 'Mexie.' Gaby never used either of those names for him."

"What name did she use?" I insisted, though I felt like a brute.

"None, except Lewis that I know of. She didn't read the signature, when she read the letter to me. At least I don't remember—"

"She read it to you!" I exclaimed.

"I thought that she did. Now—I don't know. I can't be sure of anything. She read to me what she said was a copy of the letter; that is, the worked out code. She may have left out entire paragraphs— She may have changed it, in any way, in order to keep her terrible secret from me."

"Yes, but what did she tell you the letter contained?"

Danny looked at her wrist-watch. "It is too long even to begin to tell, now. And—I don't want to tell it again; not today. I have told John all about it, you see. Later, of course— Or you may ask John to tell you. It—it was an insult from beginning to end. An insult to her. I can't bear thinking of it; not today.

"Mary," her voice changed suddenly as did her manner, "do you know why Uncle Sam asked me—almost commanded me to be in the living-room at three o'clock today?"

"No, Danny, I don't. But he told Mrs. Ricker and me to be there, too. I guess he just wants to talk to all of us, together."

"Oh—talk! What good is talk going to do? Talk, in a place like this, now, where there is not one true, certain thing to get hold of, anywhere; where not one of us can believe in another—"

She put a quick hand to her lips; her eyes widened; she turned, and hastily pushing aside the heavy curtain, went through the clothes closet into her own room.

I sat still, at the desk. The paper before me, and the sharp pencil in my hand, tempted me to make a list, as they always do in books, of the clues to date. I wrote:

Locked door.
Key in my pocket.
T. A. (I put only the initials of tobacco ashes.)
Chad's suicide.
Chad's note. What person was he trying to shield? What did Hubert Hand think that I had overhead in the cabin?
Mrs. Ricker's threat.
"Q" cap for typewriter key.
Contents of the beaded bag.
1. Two cigs missing from full case.
2. Empty match-box.
3. Empty purse. Missing bill-fold. (Robbery?)
4. Crumpled handkerchief. (Tears? Pleading?)
5. Broken cig. holder.
6. Hubert Hand's note.
The code letter.
Gabrielle's note to Danny.

This, I submit as the world's worst list of clues. It is the best example I have ever seen of the saying that a person could not see the forest for the trees. The forest was there, right enough. All I would have needed to do was to back off far enough away from the trees to look at it.

My face burns, even yet, when I realize that, at half past two o'clock on the afternoon of the fifth of July, if I had been possessed of just one lick of sense, I could, instead of writing that list of clues, have written another one; a list that, step by step, just as sure as straight ahead, would have led to the guilty person.

Why did I not take into consideration the fact that for two months the Canneziano girls had been searching for something on the Desert Moon; something which I was all but certain they had not found?

Why did I not give a thought to the fact that John, after a secret conversation with Gaby—according to Mrs. Ricker—had been clean and clear away off the place since early afternoon until evening?

Why did I not include in my list the fact that Gaby had given the gold monkey to Martha?

Why, instead of trying to puzzle out the code letter, did I not read between the lines of Gabrielle's last note to Danny?

However, at the time, since it was of my own making, I was quite well satisfied with my list. I took it to the table to check over the items. Sam had put the key, with which I had opened the attic door, alongside the other things there.

I picked it up now and looked at it for the first time. I had not looked at it, I had merely used it the night before. My heart jumped up in my throat. It was not the key to the attic door. It was a rusty old pass key that had hung on a nail in the broom closet off the kitchen for more years than I could remember.

Whoever had put this key in my pocket must have been well acquainted with the Desert Moon kitchen to have found that old key, under the brooms, and mops, and dust-rags, and chamois skins, and the rest, that hung around it, and over it in the broom-closet.

What had become of the key to the attic door?

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SESSION

When I went down to the living-room, at five minutes before three, Danny, John, Mrs. Ricker and Martha were all there. Danny and John were sitting at the far end of the room. Mrs. Ricker was in a chair near the window, tatting. Martha was on the biggest davenport, playing with the monkey charm. I went and sat beside her.

"I feel sleepy," she answered my question. "But I am happy, now. I am very happy."

"That's nice," I told her. "But if I were you I wouldn't talk much about being happy; that is, not today."

"I don't care. Gaby was hateful and mean, even if she did give me the monkey. She was good, then; but she wasn't good long enough for me to like her. I'm sorry because Chad died, though. I was awfully sorry, until I happened to remember about heaven. He is happy there now. When I die, I'll go to heaven and be happy, too. He'll love me then, won't he? I know he will."

"Of course, Martha," I said. "And he loved you here, too."

"[illegible] like a little girl. I wanted him to behave like a lady. He would have, I guess, [illegible] he hadn't shot himself. I am sorry he did that. But I'm happy, anyway, 'cause we are going to have the fireworks tonight."

"Tut, tut," I said. "We won't be having any fireworks tonight."

Her lower lips curled out. "Daddy promised," she whimpered. "Yesterday, when it looked like rain, he said never to mind, that we'd have them the very first night it didn't rain. Tonight is the first night. Daddy promised."

To my shame I never, in all the years, had gotten used to Martha. She looked like a big, healthy, strapping girl. And when, as now, I realized that a smart five year old child would have had a better mind, it shocked me all over.

Sam and Hubert Hand came into the room together. Sam looked around, counting noses.

"All here," he said, and locked the door he and Hubert had come through, and dropped the key in his pocket. He went all around the room, closing and locking all the doors and windows. He moved a chair to the foot of the stairway, pulled a small table over beside it, took his six-gun out of his back pocket, put it on the table, and sat down in the chair.

No one had moved nor had said a word. I know that I was frightened. I was not afraid of Sam, and I was not afraid of that six-gun. It did not make me a mite more uneasy than a bouquet of flowers would have; that is, if Sam had carried the bouquet in and put it on the table with the same manner with which he had carried and placed the gun. Mostly, I guess, I was afraid of being made afraid; partly, I was afraid of myself.

Hubert Hand spoke first. "Cannon, ugh?" he sneered.

"That's all right, Hand," Sam answered. "This is here, mostly I think, for ornamental purposes."

"Daddy," Martha piped up, "aren't we going to have the fireworks tonight?"

Sam frowned at her. "Not tonight, daughter."

She opened her mouth and began making those dreadful noises she always made whenever she was crossed in anything.

Sam rapped on the table. "Shut that up, here and now," he said. "Not another whimper out of you. Hear me, Martha?"

She closed her mouth with a snap. I thought those immense eyes of hers would pop out of her head. I am sure that the others of us all felt the way she looked. In all the years we had lived together on the Desert Moon, it was the first time any one of us had ever heard Sam speak even impatiently to Martha. As for scolding her, being stern with her up to this minute it had never been in the book.

"John," Sam said, "you and Danny come out of that corner, up here nearer the rest of us, and where it is light."

I tell you they came, straight, and sat on the small davenport beside Hubert Hand.

"I reckon," Sam began, "that all of you in here know that anyone could walk up to any man or woman in here and call him or her a murderer, and that not one of us could give him the lie, right now.

"I reckon that you know, too, as every one in the country knows, that at this hour the Desert Moon Ranch is rotten with the muck of crime and suspicion. Maybe you don't know that it is not going to stay that way for many more hours.

"We have called the law in, as was right and proper. And the law has been real polite, and blinked its eyes and departed. 'Folded its tents like the Arabs, and silently stole away.' Well, that's all right. I didn't much care about having those fellows mix into my private business; anyway, not until I had found out that I couldn't attend to it myself. I am not going to find that out. I can attend to it. I am going to, right here and now. Later on, when we need the law again, we'll call on it. The innocent in this room will have their names cleared. The Desert Moon will be a fit place for a white man to live on.

"Now this gun here may look like I felt violent or something. I don't. And I'm not going to act violent. This gun is here for just one purpose, and I'm dead certain it won't be used for that. A word to the wise, though. No person, barring none and including the ladies, is to leave this room until I give the word. No innocent person in here will try to leave. Any guilty person in here—and, before God, there is a guilty person here; guilty at least of aiding and abetting—is going to have too much sense to try to make a break. That is why I won't need the gun. Not, I mean, until we find the guilty person. When we have found him, it may be of some use until the sheriff can get here. That is all of that. Except that we are going to stay here, one and all, right here in this room, until we are ready to 'phone for the sheriff.

"If everyone does as I am going to tell them to do, we should be through with this session by supper time. But, if we don't get through until midnight, or until next week, we'll stay here until we do. All I'm asking of everybody here is that you all tell the truth. You'll have to, sooner or later. Better make it sooner."

During this speech my dander had been rising. It had got up pretty good and high by this time. "Sam Stanley," I spoke out, "you ought to know that you can't force truth out of anybody at the point of a gun, nor by keeping them locked up. We'll get hungry. We'll get thirsty. And when we do we'll eat and drink and go about our affairs. At least I will—unless you shoot me. I'm not fixed to put up with this kind of foolishness."

"Mary," Sam roared at me, "that's enough out of you. You be quiet. You are going to do as you are told. So are the others."

Sam had never spoken like that to me before. It left me limp as a drained jelly bag. Before I could get my breath for an answer Hubert Hand was talking.

"Changed your mind since morning, haven't you Sam? You were dead sure this morning that no one on the place had had anything to do with the murder; that Mary had locked the attic door herself, earlier in the day, and, absent-mindedly, dropped the key in her pocket."

"Never mind about my morning's opinions, Hand. You are right. Dead right. I've changed my mind. Now, since you are already going pretty good, I'll begin with you and work around the room, taking each one in turn. I want you to tell everything you know, and everything you suspicion concerning the murder."

"Sorry," Hubert Hand said, "but I don't know a damn thing except that, apparently, she was strangled to death sometime between four o'clock yesterday afternoon and eight o'clock yesterday evening. We saw her alive at four. We found her dead at eight. That's the extent of my knowledge."

"All right. Now go ahead with what you suspect."

"I can't see," Hubert Hand objected, "that suspicions have any place here. Beyond stirring up a rucus and hard feelings, they wouldn't get any of us any place."

"That is for me to decide," Sam said. "You were mighty busy for a while this morning, throwing out hints and slurs. If this session doesn't do anything else, it can anyway clear out all this whispering that is going around. Just now everybody here is busy suspicioning everybody else here. Suspicions usually have some reasoning behind them. 'Where there's smoke there's fire.' It is only fair to give everyone here a chance to examine everyone else's suspicions, and disprove them, if they can. If you think that I did the killing, I want to know it. I want a chance to prove you wrong. Come on now, Hand. Come clean."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"That is up to you," Sam drawled. "As the sheriffs say everything you say will be used against you. But, as they don't say, everything you don't say will be used against you, a sight harder. If I knew you had no suspicions, I wouldn't try to force you to invent some, just to be sociable. But you were pretty free with your hints this morning. All right. Talk."

Hubert lowered his Roman nose and pulled at his mustache for a minute. It was easy to see he was busy with a decision of some sort. He settled back in his chair more comfortably and, still pulling at his mustache, he began.

CHAPTER XXVII

HUBERT HAND TALKS

"WELL," he said, "I can talk all right. But I want to start with this understanding. I don't know any facts that amount to a damn. You're right that I have suspicions. If you weren't forcing them out of me, I'd have sense enough to keep my mouth shut from now on, at least until airing them might do some good. But, since you are determined to have them now, at the point of a gun, I'll say that I think John did it, and that somebody else in the house is shielding him."

Danny gave a thin, sick little shriek and threw her arm around John in a protecting way. John straightened. Under his tan I could see the color seeping out of his face. Gently he removed Danny's arm.

Sam lowered his white eyebrows until his eyes looked like two slits of blue light, glinting out from away behind his face. When he spoke his voice was iron.

"Why do you think John killed her?"

"In the first place, John is the only one here who hasn't a water-tight alibi—"

"Not by a damn sight he isn't," Sam interrupted. "But never mind. Go on."

"At four o'clock Gaby came down through the room. While she was still in sight, Danny called down, trying to get her to come back. Now this is just another suspicion, I don't know whether anyone here will back me up in it or not—probably not," he added the last in a hateful, slurring way, "but I noticed that her voice sounded strange, like she was excited, maybe, or else afraid."

Sam asked, "Did anyone else here notice anything of that kind?"

I had decided, right at first, to keep my mouth shut about everything; so I did.

"I thought not," Hubert Hand said, as if he had known from the start that he was the only honest one in the crowd.

Mrs. Ricker spoke. "I noticed it," she said.

Hubert bowed at her, in a sort of mocking way. Knowing what I knew, I thought that her corroboration would do Hubert Hand more harm than good. But, of course, the others did not know what I knew. Nor were they going to know it, since Hubert Hand was keeping his part of our bargain. Right or wrong, I was thankful, just then, that we had made that bargain.

"Let me see," Hubert Hand continued, "where was I? Gaby, after going through the room, stopped on the porch for a minute to talk to Chad. He came into the house in a fine humor. Gaby then went around the house to the rabbit hut, and for some reason, gave her bracelet to Martha. When Martha's turn comes, in this inquisition, I suggest that she be questioned rather closely."

Sam banged his fist on the table. "Never mind your suggestions. You are accusing John now. Stick to that."

"You bet," Hubert Hand accepted, "especially since Martha was in the house again within five or ten minutes, with every last one of us. Danny had come down by that time. From four to five, then, you and I were playing chess. Chad was at the piano. Danny and Mary were over there talking together. Mrs. Ricker was tatting, where she is now, by the window. Martha was bothering us, part of the time, and part of the time she was just fooling around the room. I'm pretty certain that not one of us left this room during that hour. You might check up on that, Sam."

Sam asked Mrs. Ricker, and Danny, and me, if we remembered anyone's leaving the room during that hour. We all said that we did not. Danny added that she might not have noticed. I wished, seeing Hubert Hand smile, that she had let well enough alone and not bothered to add that.

"At five," Hubert Hand resumed, "we three men went together to let the cows in and to milk. Mary, I believe, was in the kitchen alone, getting supper, during that time. Mrs. Ricker, Danny and Martha remained here in the living-room. Is that right?"

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," Sam said. "There is that hour in there, before supper, that we'll all have to account for right accurately before any of us has that water-tight alibi you were talking about, Hand. And," Sam added, with his own sort of emphasis, "we won't have it then."

"All right," Hubert Hand agreed. "You and Chad and I went down to the barns together. We let the cows in. We milked them. At least you and I did. Chad stayed with you and was kidding around down in your end of the barn. I heard you laughing and talking down there together the whole time. Is that right?"

"Practically," Sam answered. "All but, I couldn't swear that you were in the barn during the entire time."

"No? Well, I'll admit that I hadn't thought of that. If I'd thought of it, I'd probably have known that you—how is it?—couldn't swear that I was in the barn during the entire time."

"Meaning?" Sam demanded.

"That if John is guilty, you'll shield him with your last lie."

Sam's fists knotted at his side. His voice was not iron, now; it was tempered steel. "We'll settle about my last lie later, Hand."

"You're begging for this," Hubert Hand reminded him.

"Get on!"

"I milked four cows. Not very good, for the time—about forty minutes; but as good work as you did. And I will swear that you were in the barn the entire time. Anyway that is easy settled. Mary, did I, or did anyone of the three of us, come through the kitchen and go upstairs during that hour?"

"No," I answered.

"Weren't you," Sam questioned, "going back and forth between the kitchen and the dining-room?"

"No. Danny set the table for me. I didn't step foot out of the kitchen."

"Mrs. Ricker," Hubert Hand questioned her, "did any one of us men come in, and go upstairs through the living-room, during that hour?"

"No," she said.

"Mrs. Ricker," Sam asked, "were you right there, alone, in the living-room during that entire hour?"

"I was not alone. Martha was with me. And, several times during the hour, five or six times at least, Danny came in from the dining-room to see whether she could see John coming up the road."

"Danny," Sam spoke to her, "were Mrs. Ricker and Martha in the living-room every time you went in there?"

"I—think so."

"Only think so, eh?" Hubert Hand half sneered it.

"I mean," Danny explained, "that I am sure Mrs. Ricker was here. She was sitting right by the window. I did not particularly notice Martha."

"I can vouch for Martha," Mrs. Ricker snapped.

"All right," Hubert Hand went on, "so far, so good. The ladies, I think, especially if you remember the glass doors between the living-room and the dining-room, have established alibis that would satisfy any jury.

"Now for you and Chad and me, again. We walked together, carrying the milk to the dairy. There we took off the barn coveralls, and, at your suggestion, washed up in the dairy kitchen to save time. We came back to the house together. Mary said that supper was on the table. We all sat down to the table together. All present, you see, except John.

"Would it have been possible for you, or for me, or for Chad, to have gone down to the barn (you and I each milked four cows, remember), come back to the house and through it, with not one of these ladies seeing us, committed the murder, got back to the barn, and then to the house again, all in an hour? I think, Sam, the wisest thing you can do, is to grant us all our alibis for that hour, anyway, and then work on from there, if you're bound to."

I felt reasonably certain that if Hubert Hand had gone through the living-room, between five and six o'clock, Mrs. Ricker would not tell of it. But I was more certain that Danny, on the watch out for John, would have seen anyone who had come in through the front door.

"The alibi hour sounds fine, Hand," Sam said, "but you are making a mistake. You are assuming that I think that someone here committed the murder. I don't think that. I do think that someone in this room, right now, knows who did it. Where any one of us was, or was not, at the particular hour you're making such a stew about, probably doesn't cut any ice."

"I think it does. I began this, you know, by saying that I thought John—"

"You said that once," Sam interrupted. "Once is plenty. Go ahead with it now, if you can. Give your proofs."

"There you go. I told you I didn't have any proofs, didn't I, when you made me talk? But I have got some pretty solid bases for my suspicions. John decided, all of a sudden, to go to Rattail for the mail—or something. The kidding he came in for, right then, shows whether he usually went for the mail on a holiday afternoon. He was gone four hours instead of the two—two and a half, anyway—that he could have made it in. He had two bum excuses. First, tire trouble. That would be a better excuse, if the car wasn't standing in the garage right now with the same tires on it that he started out with."

"I know you said you had no proof of anything," Sam broke in. "I reckon, of course, you can prove that, though?"

John spoke. "I don't think he could prove it, Dad, since the spare was a True-tread, same as the others. But he's right. I changed tires twice, that's all. The spare was rotten. When I had the second blow-out, I patched the first tire and put it back on. The patch is there to prove that."

"And the rotten spare?" Hubert Hand questioned.

"It wasn't worth bothering to put on the rack. I rolled it off across the desert."

"My mistake," Hubert Hand said. "Maybe. Two hours is a long time to change tires, even twice. The second excuse was that he had met Leo Saule and had given him a tow. Saule is a rotten little half-breed, who could be bought for a half dollar. Also he lives alone, away off the main road—"

John jumped to his feet. "Get this, Hand—"

Sam had jumped too. He got to John and put his hands on his shoulders. "Keep your shirt on, Son. I am to blame for this. Your turn is coming. Wait for it. Go on, Hand."

John hesitated, and sat down again. Sam went back to his chair by the table.

"Sorry," Hubert Hand apologized, "I don't like this a damn bit better than John does; but it seems to be up to me. Well, then, he came in two hours late. He came through the kitchen; and, instead of leaving the car in the garage, he left it in the back entrance. He went straight upstairs. It took him half an hour or more to get shaved and change his clothes. When he came down he acted like a man in a daze. He couldn't eat. He offered being out in the sun as an excuse. He is out in the sun every day.

"I think that he had met Gaby, as they had planned, right after dinner when he started for Rattail. Maybe she had promised him to leave the place. He was crazy to get her off the ranch. I know that. He told me so, just the other day—said she was making trouble here, and so on. She may have had something on him that she was threatening to tell Danny, or Sam. I don't know about that, either. I don't know a damn thing about whatever they might have had between them. But I think that he killed her, out on the desert some place.

"I don't think that he had planned to do it. I think he must have threatened her, off and on, though; her note to Danny, and other things, show that she was afraid for her life. All the same, I think he started it yesterday as a bluff. But the desire was back of the bluff—that's pretty certain.

"I don't know why he brought her body back and hid it in the house. I don't give him credit for figuring out what a smart thing that was to do. He may have been afraid of footprints in the road, or on the desert, if he carried the body away and tried to hide it out there. He didn't know that the storm was coming to cover up his traces. I think, though, that it was pure funk that made him come driving home with the body hidden in the car—covered with the sacks of rock salt.

"I didn't like to think that it was Danny who helped him out, after that. It didn't seem like her. I couldn't think of anyone else, though, who would help him. In the last few minutes I've managed to think of someone else. It is a lucky thing for John. You are a damn sight stronger ally, Sam, than Danny or any one else would have been. For instance—this present magnificent bluff of yours."

"All right," Sam said. "All through?"

"I'm satisfied, if you are," Hubert Hand answered.

"I'm not," Sam drawled. "Because, like the caterpillar said, 'It's all wrong from beginning to end.' It is a queer thing, though, the way quotations always come to me. Most of the time you were talking, Hand, I kept thinking of this one: 'Give a guilty man enough rope and he will hang himself.'"

In the following chapters death again visits the Desert Moon Ranch.

The Killer

The Story of a Hoodoo Ship

By CAPTAIN DINGLE

SUBDUED men, furtive as beaten dogs, carried a dead shipmate from the forecastle to the fore hatch. The carpenter was there, waiting with palm and needle, canvas, and old iron.

"One o' you lend me a hand," said Chips, gloomily. "I ain't over well myself."

"I ain't well, neither. You lend a hand, Bill," grumbled the nearest seaman, edging away quickly.

"I got to take his beddin' out," said Bill.

Chips swore wearily. He went aft, told the skipper the men were too scared to help him bury the dead, and Dan Pitney gave utterance to a sound too bitter to be named a laugh.

"Takes two to sew up a stiff, eh? I'll say I've got some crew."

"Lucky to have anybody left to sew anybody up," muttered Chips, slouching back to the grisly job, the skipper leading the way. "The devil's in the ship. Always heard the *Garnet* was a hoodoo ship. She's a bloody killer, that's what she is, and I won't sew up no more, not alone I won't."

"Slide this canvas under him, and stow your moaning," the skipper snapped, and lifted the body without effort or emotion.

The ship was in the southern Indian Ocean, and a cold, dismal rain fell. Water trickled from saturated sails. It ran down wire rigging like a procession of silver maggots. Dan Pitney sewed at his job. Bill, the seaman who had to carry out the dead man's bedding, stumbled over the forecastle still half blinded under a wad of musty blankets, doing his job but having no idea how to air bedding in a downpour. From the forecastle came song. In a clear, bell-like soprano fit for a girl, it came:

Up aloft, among the rigging, sings the fresh
exultant gale,
Strong as Springtime in the blossom, filling
out each booming sail;
And the wild waves cleft behind us seem to
murmur as they flow
There are kindly hearts that wait us in the
land to which we go.

Dan Pitney looked up, sharply.

"Who's that singing?" he demanded of Bill. Bill flung down his blankets, and faced the skipper with desperation.

"Who? Wot do you care who? It's only another poor swine killed by your bad luck ship! Young Shamus, that is. Decent young Shamus."

"Sounds a long way from dead," grinned the skipper. That grin was a terrible thing. It was a terror to the men of the *Garnet:* yet to more observant eyes it might tell a far different story. There was stark suffering in it. And courage. And bitter resentment of the ill luck that damned his ship. Bill stooped to recover his blankets, shrinking from that grinning face above the grisly shrouded corpse.

"He ain't dead—yet! Might better be, though. Gone crazy, that's what he is: crazy mad, and singin'."

"Let's hope some more of you go singing mad instead of crawling into your bunks to die like rats!" snarled Pitney furiously. Bill took his blankets to the galley, and whined to the cursing cook. The skipper finished his sewing, lifted the body to the rail, and let it slide into the iron-gray sea. Furtive eyes watched him. Hoarse throats cursed his callousness. None saw the swift closing of his eyes or the rapid, unaccustomed prayer motioned by his salty lips.

DAN PITNEY had inherited the *Garnet* from his uncle, under whom he had sailed as mate. Life seemed very bright to Dan, the morning he first took out the ship, his own ship, in command. She had paid well. His uncle was a lucky captain. Dan had been a lucky mate. Repair and replacement bills had been trifling. And that first voyage of Dan's as master of his own vessel had begun well. His profits on a fast outward cargo had warranted him in writing to his girl at home that they could be married at the voyage end. He had secured a paying cargo homeward. He had made a fast passage. Fine weather and fine breezes, a good crew and efficient mates made that possible, and Dan recognised the fact. And that the crew, fore-and-aft, were satisfied with the ship and himself, was clear to see, for, despite the seductions of the runners as the ship sailed up the bay, the men gave the sails a harbor stow when she anchored, and rigged the cargo burtons before taking their bags ashore. Some of them even asked the mate for a show next voyage. That, as any sailor knows, gives the hall mark of merit to a ship.

Dan's girl was away from home that day. He took the mate ashore and gave him a swell dinner. There was just a little something to drink. Not much; not by any means more than enough to give a mild glow to the party; but sufficient to loosen Dan's tongue a trifle and put a warm color into his ruggedly good looking face. There had been mutual expressions of satisfaction one with the other; enthusiastic promises of still better times to come. The mate went so far as to state that he was not especially eager to get command in another ship so long as he could sail mate of the crack *Garnet*.

Then things went awry. Returning on board, at a very respectable hour, a damp mist making waterside and wharves dark and greasy, Dan slipped and fell, breaking a leg. He could not take his ship out. There was a cargo offered. He reluctantly decided to let the mate take command for a voyage. Then he had a visit from his girl, and her manner puzzled him. By little and little he learned that the news had gone about that this accident was due to liquorish indulgence. A little more, and it was plain the story was traceable to the mate. So the proferred cargo had to be turned away. The mate quit, perhaps uneasy. The *Garnet* swung to idle anchors out in the stream, with a second mate, and a combined cook-watchman to take care of her. Just before Dan was well enough to rejoin his ship, there was a bit of a blow in the harbor, and the ancient watchman tried to pay out more cable, got himself tangled up with the windlass, and rather messily killed. The second mate knew nothing about it until the ship, dragging, took the mud in the middle of noisy though not dangerous small breakers. She got a bad list, being light, and when the second mate ran forward to look at the chains and found the crumpled watchman, he too got the creeps and started to swim ashore. He was drowned.

Dan rejoined his ship to find a stranger acting as ship-keeper, and a big bill for plucking the ship off the mud and securing her. He found her good name gone, too. Men looked sideways at him and whispered as he passed. So little does it take to fasten a bad name on dog or man or ship. It had taken him six wasted months to get a cargo. He had to wait until shippers' memories dimmed. Then the natural course of events brought cargo to his ship; for when merchandise must be shipped, and bottoms are scarce, needs must take the available carrier.

Getting a crew was as difficult, though not so long a job. He got a mate by paying a bit more than standard wages, then left the rest to him. The mate was an old timer, well on the down grade of life. His only ambition was to be assured a bunk and a deck and a place at table. He got a second mate of the same sort. And together, helped by the crimps, they filled the *Garnet's* forecastle with a complement of human beings who were at least breathing when shipped, and who possessed two hands and two feet apiece. More Dan Pitney did not ask.

That voyage had been a nightmare. The ship's name went before her. A man fell from the fore-yard the first night at sea. It was not a terribly great fall: but the man fell into the pigpen, and killed two young piglets, and the old sow savagely turned upon him and rended him. Then the sow finished the job and in her fury ate the rest of her litter. The ship's fresh meat supply was ruined at the outset, for Dan had the cook kill the sow before she got loose and killed more men.

A broken royal yard came down and killed another man halfway to Australia. That too was not an uncommon mishap. But there remained a bloodstain on the deck, and the men swore it could not be holy-stoned out. They might have been right, for the *Garnet* was not a new ship, and her decks were soft in places. A stain could penetrate a soft spot so that a lot of wood must be scraped off to reach the end of it. Whatever the truth, the stain was there when the ship got to port. And her men waited for no wages. They tumbled over the side with the anchor.

Dan Pitney's luck began to put lines into his face. His mouth grew grim, and his eyes hard. Cargoes and crews were hard to get. He spent a year out there between Australia and the East, freighting indifferent intermediate cargoes. He kept up his letter writing home; but while out in the East he noticed that his girl's letters were short and infrequent. Then, in Sydney, he received a paper having a report of her wedding to his late mate. Dan laughed at that: Laughed and got roaringly drunk. He got drunk many times. Then he took a cargo of scrap iron from the Sydney Dockyard to Shanghai, and settled down into a bitter, sullen mood, certain at last that he and his ship were damned.

As if to show him that he was over ready to sink, the *Garnet* made an amazingly fast passage to China, and failed to kill a man, or to maim one. The anchor found the mud, the chain was bitted, and the last man was down from aloft, and not a mishap. His ugly cargo was safely unloaded. Dan got drunk the first night ashore; he had a few pegs of whisky the next day; but sheer surprise at the holding off of his evil genius stopped him into sobriety after that. Then when the ancient Chinaman to whom the scrap iron was consigned left the *Garnet* to go ashore after completing the business connected with the cargo, and fell into the swift river, Dan went after him with a laugh that had lost nearly all the bitterness that had spoiled it. The old Chinaman was saved. He was grateful. Dan, who had almost forgotten the affair in a week, was staggered when he was offered a paying cargo home, recommended to a shipper by the old man he had rescued.

"Try and get a few sailormen in the crowd this time, Mister," he told the mate with a grin. "We'll run the hoodoo clean out of the ship this passage home. Get white men if you have to get 'em from the jail."

THAT had been a glorious sailing day. The crew were white, and sober. Half of them were sailormen, too. And the ship sailed well. She cleared Anjer in a month, and carried pleasant breezes into the Indian ocean. Men had sung in the dog watches. That alone was something long unknown aboard the *Garnet*. Young Shamus, taken out of jail where he was repenting desertion from a warship, was a song bird of quality. Song or chantey, salty stave or sentimental ballad, Shamus knew them all, and was young enough and willing enough to sing whenever asked. For the first time in years the *Garnet's* anchors came up to a tune: her yards went aloft to the swing of a song.

"It's safe to give this crowd a rum ration, Mister," Dan told the mate the first evening out of Shanghai, after keenly weighing up the men.

The men got their rum, but Dan took none. He had taken no liquor since the day he got the cargo.

Down to the Line the ship carried fair weather. Then came a week of baffling airs and calms. It was hot. Nothing out of the common. Just hot, Line weather. Rain in squalls, and rain that fell straight and windlessly. It was to be expected. The tanks were replenished with sweet fresh water. The men plugged the scuppers and flooded the maindeck, having an orgy of freshwater bathing and washing of clothes.

Two weeks of calms. Dan's brow was creased. He chewed at his lip. One day the rain fell for fourteen hours solid without one fluttering sigh of wind. It drummed on the decks. It slashed across the idle canvas. Like balls of soft putty it thudded on the skylight glass: Whop! Whop! Whop! it came out of the saturated foot of the spanker hauled amidship to stop the whanging of the boom.

Three weeks. Dan took a drink, often. Then faint airs, always ahead. A gale. They ran before it for two days, away from their port of destination. And a month followed of blazing sun and the lightest of breezes in which the *Garnet* tacked, two days on port, two days on starboard tacks, seeking that wind which should not be in her teeth.

It was at the end of that month that the scurvy appeared. A man shambled aft, showing the skipper bleeding gums and swollen wrists. The man was dosed with vinegar, and stood his trick at the wheel; but fell down the poop ladder when the trick was done and never got out of his bunk again except to be buried.

Dan made an inspection of the men. Scurvy was already badly established. He had feared it. His stores were poor. Long periods of ill fortune had forced economy; and the greater profits of his last passage had gone in clearing off debts. There was no limejuice in the ship. Little vinegar. He had bought limes from a boat off Anjer; but they had long since gone. He knew the beef and pork were bad. He bought them in China, and cheaply; but he ate the same food as the crew, and his faith in his luck had come back to such a degree that he believed the ship would make another good passage and get home before the poor food did harm.

But the ship's hoodoo was dogging her. The day that the scurvy appeared openly, the breeze came down with a whistling bang, fair for home. It was a gale. The *Garnet* flew. Seas roared at her bows. Running before it, she carried her canvas like the crack she was. Dan grinned and rubbed his hands. Scurvy was forgotten. At speed like that the gale would soon blow the scurvy out of her.

"Ssssss! Roll home, old *Garnet!*" he muttered, watching the leaping seas at her quarters.

The men rallied. But a fair wind cannot cure scurvy. The weaker fell ill, and died. One fine sailorman was flung from aloft through sheer inability to hold on, so weak had the disease made him. That was the man Dan Pitney had sewn up and buried himself. Young Shamus was singing—crazed. Chips was weakening. The mates grumbled at the press of sail which they would soon be unable to handle through loss of men.

"Grind up all the potatoes into juice, skins and all," he told the steward. And the men were fed the juice in spoonfuls while it lasted. He drank much rum himself; but he did three men's work. The second mate fell sick. Dan nursed him, and stood his watch. The fore royal split. It blew away before Dan could get up to secure it. There was nobody else to do it. The mate would not leave the deck. The thrashing of it had awakened Dan, too late. The main royal blew down wind in a gossamer of fine threads while Dan was coming down from aloft.

"Ought to take in sail while we can!" the mate whimpered. "Look, I got it too!"

Dan swiftly glanced at the man. Scurvy was upon him. And the *Garnet* was sorely overpressed. Even running before the hard gale she rolled her main deck full of water. But Dan Pitney knew that his one chance to save his men was to reach St. Helena and get fresh vegetables for them. It was his nearest port with the wind he had and the crew he could muster. He glanced aloft; bit his lip and grinned. The mate shuddered at that grin. It was the bitterest he had yet seen on the skipper's grim face.

"HOLD on for five minutes, Mister, and you can turn in," Dan told him. Dan went below, drank a staggering hooker of rum, sugar, and vinegar, and put on a heavy watch coat. Then he sent the mate below, bidding him swallow potato juice before turning in.

The miserable few forward cursed Dan. They crept from forecastle to galley, from forecastle to wheel, and back as best they might, scarcely able to weather the boarding seas in their weakness. Through all Dan Pitney stood there aft, grim as death, impervious as rock, watching his ship through her labor, standing a trick at the wheel where a man fell, or when a relief failed to arrive. He stood there at the helm for a day and a half alone; the ship flew on before the smoking gale, rain slashing athwart her, the sky and seas a smother of misty spume. And from time to time Dan wiped a hand across his eyes.

One of the symptoms of scurvy may be disordered vision. There are others, such as evil breath, and haggard features. Dan's eyes bothered him. He twisted a becket about the wheel and ran to the chart room, peering into the mirror of his sextant for lack of a better. He was haggard, certainly. He breathed upon the glass, and smelled the faint vapor. There was nothing fetid about his breath. Nothing but a faint aroma of rum. He grinned at that. It was to be expected. As for the haggardness, well, that might be expected too. It was the vision that worried him. He might have put that down to long vigil, quite justly. But the fear was in him. He returned to the helm and wondered.

There was nothing for men to hate him for. They ought to have praised him. Yet they cursed him. They cursed his grim face. They cursed his grin. They cursed the very strength which kept him erect and left them at peace to die if they would. They cursed him when he roughly forced potato juice between their swollen gums; and they cursed him when the potato juice was ended. They could not eat the salt meat the cook grudgingly cooked. When the cook fell sick, and they had to eat sopped biscuit, they cursed that, though it was and had long been the only food they were able to assimilate. A man went aft and cursed Dan to his face, swaying on tottering feet, raving, waving a knife feebly. Dan knocked him down without a word, picked him up and carried him forward to his bunk, leaving the ship to stagger on. It was the swiftest and most humane way to handle the poor wretch. They cursed him for that. And through all the hurly-burly young Shamus piped in his sweet, clear tenor that illness seemed not to befog:

Rolling home, rolling home, rolling home across the sea,
Rolling home to friendly faces, rolling home, dear land to thee.

Night came. The flying mist thickened. The *Garnet* flew before the gale, enveloped in a tremendous roar of wind and sea. There were no running lights put out. Nobody to trim them. No ships down there anyhow. Dan caught himself as he was falling asleep at the wheel. He wondered how the mates were getting along. The steward had not been up to bring him food all day. He becketed the wheel again, and stumbled below. The second mate was delirious. The mate's face was like a pasty mask of yellow, in which the closed eyes were sunk deeply. The steward sat in his own berth, the last of the potato juice spilled over his knees. He was dead.

Dan laughed rustily. He drank more rum, sugar, and vinegar; carried the steward up on deck wrapped in his bedding, lashed him up with an iron snatchblock for ballast, and dropped him into the bubbling wake. Then he cast off the becket and steered his ship.

His eyes bothered him still. He could scarcely see the ship's bows. At times the mainmast was misty. He shook his head, bull-like, fretfully. Rubbing his eyes only filled them with grinding salt. He kept the binnacle light going with oil filched from the chart room lamp. He needed the binnacle light to steer by. There was nothing to use the chart room for within a thousand miles. But the compass was poorly illumined at times. The binnacle glass or his eyes were surely fogged. And forward, above the roar of wind and sea, that damnable Shamus howled his maddening song:

Rolling home dear land to thee!

Dan started to go forward. He would stop that silly howling. And out of the darkness abeam came swift catastrophe. It cut short Shamus's song. A long jibboom spiked athwart the *Garnet's* forecastle-head. A lean, low, laden barque crashed into the ship. Amid the crashing of gear, the thundering of emptied sails, the screams of men, the smashing rending of timbers, the roar of the sea seemed quelled. Then the wind took the *Garnet* aback, as she was wrenched from her course by the entangling barque. Dan watched his straining masts, awed by their terrific stress. He was vaguely aware that the barque seemed to be cut in two. Then he dashed forward, shouting for hands to swing the foreyards to get the ship off wind again. While shouting, he flung down coils of braces himself: and he took his superb strength of muscle and will to the herculean task of backing the yards, darting from weather to lee, perforce allowing yards to come around with a slam through sheer inability to be in two places at once. Blinded with sweat and flying salt spray, his legs knocked from under him often as the arrested ship took great seas over the reeling bulwarks, Dan was aware of others scrambling about the decks, feebly grappling for ropes to haul and hauling weakly. The fear of death by drowning, and alarm at the crash of the collision, was enough to get men out of their bunks even though nigh death from scurvy. But there was no song among them. Dan brushed against them in the work. He felt as if he brushed against ghosts.

THE *Garnet* swept wide of the wind, and Dan ran aft to check her with the helm. Right at the poop rail he was further shocked. There was no light. Only a shadowy lighter darkness of mist. But in it was life. Out of it came a voice: a woman's voice.

"Please lend a hand here!"

Dan was staggered. A woman! He laughed, harshly. Of all things needed to make his tale of evil luck complete, here it was. Calm and head winds. Scurvy. Half his crew dead, the other half as good as dead. Collision, and a very good possibility of wreck: he had yet to look into that as soon as he steadied the ship. Now a woman! As if he had not had plenty of trouble with women. One woman had quit him when the going got rough. They were all bad luck in a ship. They were all alike.

"Help me, quick! I can't hold it!" the voice cried; and Dan responded, sensing something unusual in the tone. He reached the side of a slim, oilskinned figure, and wondered many things. Chiefly he wondered how the woman got there first of all; and why she did not seem scared to death. She held on to something over the side. He reached along until he found her hands, and his own fastened upon a rope, which she had turned about the pipe rail.

"Father's hanging on to the vegetable locker. Your ship's moving too fast for—me—to—hang—on!"

Dan had caught up the end of the rope. It was fastened to a ringbolt in a floating structure that floundered beneath his rail. Hastily taking more turns to secure it, he ran to the helm and steadied the *Garnet*. Then he ran back and clambered over the rail to grope for the man there. It was a perilous groping. Ship and floating locker crashed together on the big seas. Dan worked in a daze. He scarcely realized that he lifted aboard a heavy, helpless man.

"Have you no crew?" the woman was asking him, helping the man over the rail. There was no trace of the barque. There was a clash of gear as the *Garnet* edged to the wind again. Dan must get back to the wheel. He took his knife to cut the locker adrift. It was a drag.

"Half of 'em dead. Other half down with scurvy," he muttered, the blade on the rope. The woman stopped him, crying excitedly:

"Scurvy? Stop! Don't cut! The locker's full of potatoes! Save them. I'll take the wheel!"

What sort of a woman was this? Dan obeyed her suggestion without very much of a notion what he did or what it was all about. He knew that the ship was being gentled back to her course before the wind. The silence of the filled sails told that. And as he remembered it, the voice had no fright in it. The woman was breathless, but unafraid.

From the forecastle three decrepit men had ventured when the ship was taken aback. They remained. Their trouble had been as much panic as scurvy; and in the moment of fear, when death by drowning seemed sure if they stayed below, their disease proved less terrible than they had been willing to believe. They crept to Dan's side, whining, reaching out wavering hands to help.

"Pass me down the lee vang!" Dan

gritted. It was no moment for recriminations. He had a strong idea that the men had been malingering; but then they might not have been, either. Precious potatoes were to be salved. "Get a move on!" He could not hold on to that cumbersome locker much longer. The *Garnet* foamed forward, and the heavy square box, deep with tubers, swirled and sagged at the end of a creaking, precarious rope. The men fumbled and found the guy which held the spanker gaff in trim, the spanker being furled before the wind. The lower block was passed to Dan, who hooked it into the ringbolt of the locker. And with the fall part taken to the poop capstan they wearily hove in the tackle until the big clumsy locker swung in over the rail with a smash and came to rest, a mess of broken teak and burlap, out of the midst of which came a sweet earthy smell.

Dan went to investigate his passengers. The man lay where he had been placed. The woman steered. The faintest of light from the binnacle played intermittently upon her glistening oilskins.

"If you have a hand to take the wheel, I want to see to dad," she said. Her teeth clicked sharply, as if she were holding herself strongly in hand against some emotion. Dan was still dazed. Here he was, and here she was, and on the deck lay a man, her father, and all apparently out of nowhere in no time. Dan tersely sent one of his feeble men to the wheel, crushing a potato under his rubber boot heel and bidding the man swallow the pulp since he whined that his teeth were too loose to bite with.

Together the woman and Dan knelt beside her father. His eyes were shut. Dan got a lantern lighted. The man was rather old looking, but there was more than age in that drawn, pained face: and more than the pain of any recent injury. One wasted hand groped for and fastened upon the girl's hand. Her head was bent to catch something he said; and soon she glanced up at Dan, her dry throat working, but with a brave spirit shining in her moist eyes.

"He's gone," she said.

"Gone?" echoed Dan. He felt as if he were awakening out of a queer sleep. The woman seemed to be acting in as casual a manner as if she belonged aboard the *Garnet*, had always been there; not at all like a woman just plucked from a doomed barque in a roaring sea. There were gray streaks creeping into the eastward sky, and the leaping crests and the storming ship achieved a ghostly illumination. Dan saw the woman's face clearly. It was a young face. The face of twenty-five. A strong face. Strong, womanly, kind. Sorrow was there, and the weariness that comes of long vigil. Dan could appreciate that look. Most of all, there was an utter absence of outward inclination to weep, though the big brown eyes were cloudy and strained. And when she spoke her voice was low and steady. There seemed to be in it a note of understanding sympathy for Dan himself.

"IT'S for the best. He has suffered a lot," she was saying. It was a brief and unfrilled story she told to Dan, even while her tender capable hands performed the last small services for her dead parent. Her father, Captain Nelson of the barque *Natal*, had been ill with Bright's disease. The barque was trying to make Cape Town to land him when the *Garnet* collided with her. The old man was in very bad shape, and had little faith in his mates. He was lying on blankets on the vegetable locker top, unwilling to go to his bed. Nobody had seen the *Garnet* before the impact. Even the girl, who was with her father through the night, had been startled out of a sense of semi-security to find herself and the locker and her father sliding into the sea through shattered rails, while the night was hellish with uproar.

"I caught your rail as the ships parted," she explained. "It was your own main-topsail brace I passed through the locker ringbolt. I thought father might recover. I know now that he could not. And the loss of the *Natal* would have ruined him. He's better off now. He did not blame your ship. We were carrying no lights—"

"Lights? Nor were we!" cried Dan. He felt ashamed before this courageous woman who faced her tremendous calamity so sturdily.

"You couldn't, with your crew down. I must look at them when we have done all we can for dad. Our own poor fellows are all—"

"Let me help you," Dan interrupted, lifting the body. The mere thought of that barque's crew, gone to the last man, made him shiver. And this girl, she could find it in her heart to feel thankful that her father had found rest even in death; she could find time to give a thought to the lost men; yet for herself she had never uttered one word of regret, of grief, of bitterness against fate. Dan could not help recalling his own manner of meeting calamity. The recollection put a ferocity into his heart which reflected itself in his actions. He picked up Captain Nelson alone, and bore him in to the chartroom settee. Barbara Nelson borrowed palm and needle and prepared the body for burial in sailorly fashion.

She found time to think of saving the vegetable locker to fight the scurvy with, right there in the actual moment when any man might have been forgiven for forgetting all save safety. Dan pondered on that, too, standing there in the dawn, watching the way of his ship in the big seas while that slender, fair young woman plodded on at her grim task. When about done, she kissed the dead face passionately before closing the last of the shroud; after that momentary display of emotion she was again the brave, capable sea woman.

"'Shall we launch him homeward now?" she asked. "I know he would not want to linger."

They launched the old captain. It was Barbara who whispered a prayer. She had used up much strength lately; but her hand was firm and her voice almost steady. She watched the long canvas shape slide into the cold sea without a tremor. And when all was over she stood for a minute with head bowed, then turned to Dan smiling wanly.

"Shall we look the men over now?" she suggested. "We two cannot sail this big ship forever alone."

"I don't know about that," Dan muttered. "I believe you could almost do it yourself. Shall we look in the forecastle? It may not be nice."

Young Shamus had been silent for many hours. Now he raised his clear voice, with a shrill break in it:

Rolling home, rolling home, rolling home
    across the sea,
Rolling home to friendly faces, rolling home,
    dear land, to thee.

"That one's singing crazy," Dan said, gloomily. Barbara Nelson was hurrying forward, the sprays drenching her, the seas swirling about her booted feet. At the voice she quickened her step. Dan followed her into the forecastle. He recoiled from the fetid air that rushed out. She entered like a living light. The place seemed sweeter for her entry. One of the men who had been scared into going on deck was doddering about in there, smashing up potatoes in a messkid, wolfing the pulp. The girl cheerily bade him smash up some more. Made the fellow feel less of a lurcher by implying that he was doing something useful even before being told. Dan hurriedly examined the murky place. He found four dead men; carried them out, and buried them before the girl had completed her ministrations to the living.

There is nothing like raw potatoes to check scurvy. There is nothing like light to sweeten dark places. Nothing in the world like a good woman to prove evil genius a liar. Dan Pitney saw the sun come out three days after Barbara Nelson came on board so informally. He checked up his reckoning. It surprised him. He had gone on sailing his ship while she nursed the sick. He had known, vaguely, that one by one the mates returned to duty; and one by one the men appeared on deck for fresh air. He knew that the scurvy was being beaten off, because food was demanded again, and he had to issue stores for a volunteer cook to prepare. But he had scarcely realized that the ship was so near to the island where plenty of fresh provisions could be secured. And through the darkest days, he had watched his ship's gear go piece by piece. He had grown used to it. It was all a part of his evil luck. Part of the record being made by the *Garnet* the killer.

HE WAS amazed to find, on close inspection, that he had lost but little gear. Aside from two royals, with their yards and gear, and a parted backrope, the ship had suffered little. The collision with the barque had merely broken some stanchions, stripped away a dozen feet of teak rail or so, and bent in some plates above water. Then the saloon was different. It had grown to be a gloomy, dismal dungeon. Meals, when served, were ordeals; occasions for passing bitter speech with bitter bread. Now the daylight got into it somehow. And the sunlight. A woman's hand was visible, everywhere. A meal became a thing to anticipate. The poor food could be fashioned into shapes which tempted sickly palates. And it was.

Barbara used potatoes lavishly, in a vast number of forms; she fed raw potato pulp to scurvied men until they were well. She stood her trick at the helm often, to leave a man available for other work. Young Shamus worshipped her. The scanty crew would have died for her to a man. Both mates vowed that the *Garnet* sailed faster, steered better, and spurned the seas more easily when she was on deck. As for her steering, there was one old salt who swore that the wind always drew four points free the moment she took the helm. He was ready to fight to prove it, too.

Dan found his eyes roving whenever she was on deck. He had known women. One woman had quit him as rats quit a sinking ship. He had not sunk, but that was no fault of the woman's. He was about due to sink. This voyage had come near foundering him. The very moment that this new woman came on board, was mightily close to the final moment for him and his killer *Garnet*. Yet, see what came of it. The *Garnet* acted like a killer no longer. A more sea kindly ship never rolled down to St. Helena. The few men left grew hearty and lusty. They never growled, though the work was murderous for so few. Bitterness had gone zooming down to leeward. Evil Chinese salt horse appeared as ambrosia when made into stew or hash after many washings in fresh water, and blended with ancient preserved stuffs used with intelligence and willing hands.

No doubt of it, Barbara Nelson was a vastly different kind of woman. Not that her brightness and cheery manner wholly hid the grief that followed her loss. It was simply that her courage was greater than her grief. Her courage was infinite. She had heard all about the killer while tending to the sick. She regarded Dan Pitney with a deeper sympathy thereafter. She never mentioned it; but she knew, and Dan knew that she did.

They sighted the island in the sunset. In the morning they would come to anchor. There would be fresh beef, and vegetables, and fish, and new water.

"I suppose you want to land and go home by steamer," said Dan. Forward, young Shamus was singing, and his voice was wonderful.

> Cheer up, Jack, bright smiles await you, from the fairest of the fair,
> And her loving eyes will greet you, with kind welcomes everywhere.

"I have no home now. The *Natal* was my home," Barbara said with the first note of regret he had heard in her voice. "I had hoped I might be allowed to continue on in your ship. We lost everything with the barque, but I have friends at home. They may—"

> Rolling home, rolling home, rolling home dear land to thee.

"You lived at sea all the time?" Dan queried. He had guessed that much. Barbara Nelson was the complete sea woman.

"All the time since school," she said. "It's my life. I love it."

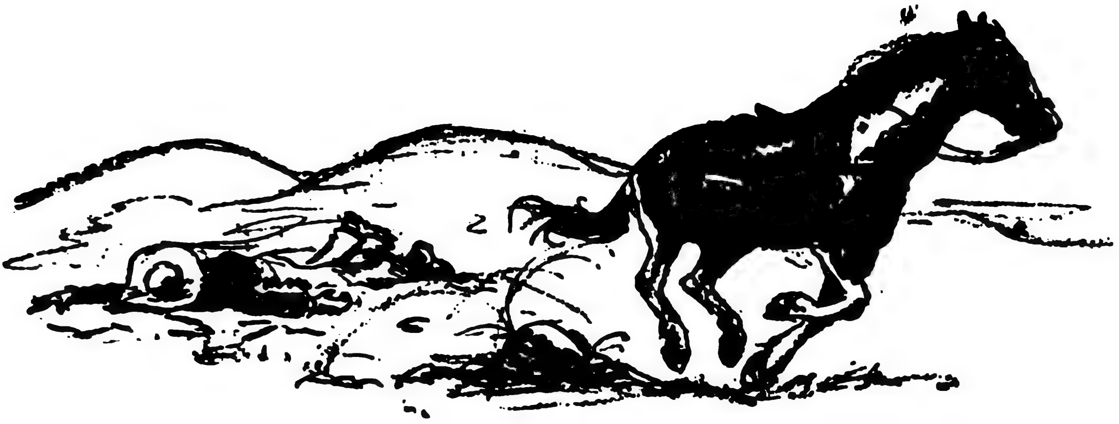
"It's cruel as hell!"

"Do you see only the cruelty?" she chided gently. Dan stared at her. She had small reason to see anything else. But one glance at her face, all aglow in the sunset, showed Dan how insignificant the sea's cruelty could be when braved with such a spirit as animated her slender body.

"By God, you're right!" he breathed. "It's a grand, and—and— Oh, I'm no spiller of words, Barbara, but if you want to stay in the *Garnet*, I mean stay for good, I—you—well, dammit—"

> And we'll sing in joyful chorus, in the watches of the night,
> We shall anchor in the haven when the gray dawn brings the light.

Young Shamus gave that final verse tongue in bell tones, and the small, hoarse chorus rolled around him. It was as if those sea salted survivors of a grim passage realised that two lonely souls aft were about to come to their haven too.



I. THE WRONG KIND OF A KILLING

THE feud between the Bar-Question Ranch and the Two-Track Dollar outfit came to a head at Empty Gun Court in the trial of Wayne Putnam on the charge of murder. Putnam was foreman of the Bar-Question, a slender, dark complexioned, intensely active and capable man hardly more than twenty-one years of age. The circumstances were familiar enough, and there seemed hardly any need of perjury to prove the case.

Putnam was accused of shooting Roy Baler, son of Old Dollar Baler, at an arroyo fence. No one had witnessed the shooting, but Putnam had been seen six miles eastward of the wash, riding line alone—an unusual thing for a foreman to be doing. The father, when the son's body was found, rode immediately to swear out a warrant, for he was on close and friendly terms with the Empty Gun administration, and it would be easy and better to have things done legally than to have them settled personally, on account of the narrow margin between the county's rival factions at the election show-downs.

A posse, led by Sheriff Linden, rode out to the Bar-Question outfit. Apparently its arrival was unexpected, for when the horsemen came down the little cañon creek into sight less than two hundred yards distant, they found Putnam and several of his men branding the calves of a small round-up—and not one of them had on a gun. A swift dash by Linden had captured Putnam, covered the ranch buildings against an attack from the rear, and in fact accomplished his object plumb peaceably.

"What's this?" Putnam exclaimed.

"Murdering Roy Baler," the sheriff answered, and read the warrant.

"Roy *dead?*" Putnam demanded, sharply.

The sheriff and all the posse, with one exception, laughed rather sneeringly. Derry Linden, the sheriff's son, however, watching the foreman narrowly and with the eyes of a man who had with avid curiosity studied psychology in an Eastern university, did not laugh. Derry saw in Putnam's eyes and in the quick intensity of his sharp, quick stare something that was inexplicable, which might mean superb self-control, or it might mean surprise or resignation—or combinations of varied emotions and calculations.

The posse rode into Empty Gun Court and put the prisoner in the big, substan-

Three More Tales from the Life of the Old West

By

RAYMOND S. SPEARS

tial jail. The grand jury met a week later, found indictments charging murder and an extra frill or two, as regards attempting to confiscate unbranded cow babies. The supposition was that Roy Baler had caught Putnam tricking the Two-Track Dollar property there at the Arroyo Cholla, as it was called. Motive did not matter much, in fact, for Putnam was a killer and hated, it could be proved, anyone wearing the Two-Track Brand.

The Bar-Question, a ranch company owned by the Currey brothers, engaged Senator Robert Sling's law partnership for the defense, while "Dollar" Baler engaged Judge Ripley Lipsum as counsel for the people and assistant to County Prosecutor Jedsey Smacks, and all hands went at it, legally speaking, with Lincoln Chase for the presiding judge and a hand-picked jury for the determining factors.

Having pleaded not guilty, denying emphatically any knowledge of the killing of the youth, Putnam sat back while the forensics raged around him. He seemed fully aware that every deck was stacked against him and every card marked for the prosecution to play. The sheriff had gathered the jury from among the county organization's most faithful supporters, and the whole proceeding was fixed. The refusal to plead guilty and take a life sentence was regarded as a quibble, and rather an unfriendly one to the public, at that, for the trial was costing the taxpayers a lot of money.

Putnam went on the stand in his own behalf. The prosecution had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the accused had been seen riding at a lope less than six miles away from the victim. And the first question Senator Sling asked was;

"Putnam; on October 11th, where were you at dawn?"

"Eating breakfast at the Bar-Question."

"Then what?"

"We finished about mid-dawn. I told the boys off to their day's work. We were dragging for late branding. We brand autumn's, so's screw worms won't egg into the wounds. I wanted to look through the southwest corner of our pasture. I rode down to the line—"

"Now here are the blueprints of the Bar-Question and the Two-Track Dollar ranches. They are drawn to the same scale, as the county surveyor has testified. They are laid edge to edge as you see. The Arroyo Cholla—please indicate it."

"There—right due south of our outfit, and we call it twelve miles. The arroyo slopes our way out of the Angel Mountains. The line between us runs along this side the range, at the top of the wash slopes close against the rock bluffs—kind of a rim rock along there. We use the bluffs for a fence, connected up by wire across the draws, washes, arroyos—whatever you call them."

"Now you say you headed into the southeast?"

"Yes, sir. I was heading east, when I hit the line through—direct."

"Where did you come to the line?"

"About here, over on what we call Black Shoulder."

"But that's a long ways from the Arroyo Cholla."

"Yes, sir, about five miles."

"How did you go—from the ranch?"

"Why, I headed south. About six miles down, where the arroyo comes into this Left Wash, we call it, I turned to the left up that narrows, kind of a little gorge. I rode up onto the mesa, about two miles out. I wanted to look over the east side of Black Shoulder, in the rough country, there. Line riding, Frank Pardy told me he'd seen some calves through there that hadn't been branded. I wanted to figure them out. We have water through there, and sometimes Two-Track Dollar stock comes into it. It's rough, but passable, and we've never fenced it—either of us. I rode to the line, and saw three of the Baler outfit on the hog-back, as I was riding east. I found we'd missed some cows. Course, they'd strayed up over onto the Two-Track pasture, and when they found them, they threw them back for us. We'd done the same for them, earlier."

"Then on that morning of October 11th, you did not go anywhere near Arroyo Cholla?"

"No sir, not within five miles. Right across from this mesa-top was the closest. Coming through here, probably I was within five miles, perhaps about four and a half miles."

"Have a gun with you?"

"Yes, sir—a .32-40 rifle in a boot, and my Colts."

"Why did you carry them?"

"Well—uh—I reckoned they'd be good company. I'd sure felt right lonesome without them—"

Even the jurymen laughed at that.

"Did you shoot anything that morning?"

"I didn't pull ary one out of its scabbard, Senator."

"You didn't know Roy Baler had been shot down?"

"The first I knew was when Sheriff Linden read the warrant to me, accusing me of the killing."

"The prosecution may now take the witness," Senator Sling said.

FURY was in the eyes of the whole Baler faction. The jury had grown mighty thoughtful. They had been chosen for their bias, but even prejudice cannot overcome in the minds and hearts of honest men the impression made by a frank, clear, unreserved statement even of an enemy. Wayne Putnam was a hard, grim, old-young man. He was a fighter. Despite his youth he had become one of the best ranch managers in the whole county. He was facing death by hanging, and he was swagger and contemptuous of his enemies as he turned to face their malignant hate—because he had made a good impression on even them.

"You say you had a rifle and a revolver with you—looking for unbranded baby calves?" snarled Judge Lipsum cross-examining for the people.

"Yes, sir."

"Afraid a range bull'd attack you, maybe?" sneered the attorney.

"No. I'm not afraid of any hoofed beast."

"What were you afraid of, then?"

"Some scientific varmint destroyers inoculated coyotes up north of us, a while back, to give them rabies. They've gone mad, and skunks, sheep, cattle, horses—even humans have been bit. I don't ride out without a gun of some kind, on their account."

"You've carried a gun for business—with men?"

"Yes—but not lately."

"What! You say you don't wear a gun for business with the way you've been warring on the Two-Track Dollar outfit?"

"They haven't come our side the line; we haven't gone their side the line; we've had a lot of hard feeling, Judge. Men have been killed on both sides—but not along the line fences. We've fought here in Empty Gun. We've fought with guns and in politics and some of the boys, having checked their guns over at the Dancing Mists Hall, sure walloped around, hitting and squabbling. But there's never been a bullet thrown either way across the line. I jest couldn't start doing it, Judge! I'd never pull a gun first—and I know Roy Baler never pulled a gun on me, when we met. I'd seen him along the line two-three times this summer. We didn't speak. We watched each other—clost, and both ready, course. We didn't shoot—we never swapped bullets. And I sure despise myse'f, thinking even those that hate me would believe I'd shoot an enemy—especially one up-standing like Roy Baler—in the left-back the way he was murdered."

"I suppose you'd have prevented his killing—supposing you didn't do it yourself! You want us to believe that?" the judge lost his temper.

"I'm here to tell the truth, Judge," Putnam replied, "naturally it's generally painful to you, Judge—truth is."

Lipsum drew back, like a cat. He had miscued and was losing his case. In their desperate rage the Balers had anticipated an easy verdict of guilty. But Wayne Putnam was convincing even them of his innocence. He needed hanging, anyhow. What was ascendency in the region good for, if the power didn't include swinging a man who was in the way—bad and a killer? Those were days when if the big fellows didn't order the course of events, they were sure to be crushed by the scoundrel hands of worse hearts.

Lipsum called up his reserves. In rebuttal he put two cowboys on the stand who swore that the defendant's testimony as to his course was a lie. The riders declared they had seen the tracks of a horseman coming south into the Arroyo Cholla and then eastward to where Putnam had been seen by the three witnesses after Roy was killed.

When the two had testified, the audience knew their testimony was a lie. With Old Dollar Baler they had seen Putnam riding by, but they had not followed his back track and, in fact, the defence and prosecution both had neglected immediately to make sure about the tracks which were vital in the case—Putnam's route, and the killer's route. It might even be one of the Bar-Question boys had bushwhacked the enemy rancher's son. In that case, the foreman would better be held responsible—for luck and example.

Old Baler, the father, returned to the stand in re-direct. A gaunt, weathered, powerful man he showed the squint of sorrow for his only son and the glint of bitter desire for vengeance against those he held responsible for his bereavement.

He told of coming westward that morning along the line, high up on the back of the Angel Range, and how stopping opposite the Black Shoulder, the three had watched Putnam riding eastward from the arroyo where an hour later they found his son Roy lying dead in the wide, shallow sandwash, shot down from some ambush of cacti or cedar or broken stone—the place had not been determined.

"Mr. Baler," Senator Sling asked, in cross-examination gently, for even the rancor of feuds and rivalries could not ignore the father's loss, "what horse did Roy ride that day he was killed?"

"Eh—what?" the old man blinked, "Why—" his crystaline eyes turned away as he hesitated, "seems like it must have been that bay four-year-old—wa'nt it, boys?" he turned to his own foreman, Cadrey.

"That's so—he started the day before—I thought—" Cadrey hesitated.

"Roy—he was young," Baler spoke with difficulty. "Now't you speak of it I remember he was going down the Pueblo Jolla. Had a girl he was courting there. He told me he'd ride the north line westward coming home. He was doing that when he was murdered."

"But where's his horse?" The senator pressed, "His saddle, his bridle and the blanket?"

"Sho-o!" Baler breathed, "That's so—we ain't seen hide nor hair of them, for a fact."

After all, Old Baler wasn't gifted with dishonesty or with a lying tongue. He meant well. He belonged to a day when men lived only by facing enemies, killing them. In the prime fact of murder that disappearance of the victim's mount had been completely missed.

BUT Derry Linden had noticed Wayne Putnam's surprise and puzzlement when he was arrested, accused of the killing. The sheriff's son could not, without incurring the suspicion of treason to his father's faction and friends, give voice to what was at best a surmise of intellectual observation and perspicuity. As a college graduate, he could hardly expect any one to pay any attention to his book folderols, such learning being absurd, compared to the practicalities of experience and horse sense.

Saying nothing, he had gone ransacking the terrain. Taking everything for granted, the prosecution had accepted the appearances of things, according to their desires. Deputy Derry Linden kept his tongue tied. He knew better than to ask questions, even as to the whereabout of the murdered young man's horse. But riding alone in a spiral out from the scene of the shooting, he found a hundred yards up the arroyo where the bushwhacker had lain, and where he had thrown out the empty shell of his .38-55 caliber rifle repeater. The fatal bullet had not been found, and the prosecution had taken for granted that Putnam's .32-40 had been used.

Over on the south side of the Angel range, a way inside the Two-Track Dollar pasture Derry found also a foundered cow pony, a bay with a Bird Head brand—a strange one in all the Empty Gun country. Linden caught and led the animal into Empty Gun Court while the trial of Putnam was coming to a close. He arrived as the prosecution declared it rested its case. The defense, as the hostile administration and the divided spectators grew tense, hesitated for a minute, Senator Sling and his assistants whispering to make sure they had neglected no point. The jury was grim—they might do anything.

Deputy Derry Linden came in at that moment. He was leading the old, strange cow pony and he had in his other hand the empty .38-55 shell. The presiding judge started up, angrily, as the animal's heavy hoofs shuffled on the thick plank floor. Sheriff Linden turned red with anger at this tactless intrusion by his son.

"What do you mean—by this thing?" Judge Lincoln Chase called out, shrilly, "Turn that horse back out'a here!"

"Judge, I found where Roy's bushwhacker drew down with his rifle," the deputy sheriff answered. "He shot with a .38-55—making a bigger hole than Wayne Putnam's .32-40 could have done. I found this horse over on the south side the Angel range divide—You can see the Bird Head brand. It was out among the juniper cedars, and hadn't been picked up. You can see the saddle sores, yet—where it'd been hard rode, and desert foundered, looks like to me."

"I'll put you on the stand as a defense witness, Deputy Linden!" Senator Sling declared, promptly.

Accordingly the sheriff's son went on the stand. He testified according to his informal statement. He shot the prosecution's case to flinders. Even a fixed jury couldn't convict against the testimony of one of the prosecution-administration's own men. Judge Lipsum, furious at his failure, vented his anger on the deputy sheriff for spoiling what little case he had left.

"NOW look-a here," Lipsum demanded, "how come you went licking the calf over again, when your own father and your own official associates were united in agreeing as to all the facts in this case, Derry Linden?"

"When we arrested Wayne Putnam he was surprised—he hadn't known Roy Baler was dead," Linden replied. "He couldn't have killed the man and not known it. Accordingly, I dragged the range again. I open-circled, I spiraled out from where Roy was found shot. I located the bushwhack back on the Baler pasture, south of the line. Over on yon side too, I found this strange horse. Somebody shot Roy Baler to get a fresh horse. Over on the sheriff's office hook I found this reward notice."

He handed over a handbill, and it was spread out for all to see and read;

WANTED FOR MURDER

John Avile
32 yrs. 5 ft. 9 in.
Dark Complexion,
145 pounds

Is Riding a Bird Head
Brand Bay Cow Pony

A Bad Man, And
Will Shoot Under All
CIRCUMSTANCES

Hold Up, Cattle Thief
Horse Raider,
Train and Bank Robber

$3,000 Reward Upon
Capture, Dead or Alive

Sheriff Olive,
Almala, Sept. 30.

The old rancher, whose son had been murdered by a passing fugitive to obtain a fresh horse, rose to his feet, his head turning as his clear gaze swept to every corner of the court room, leaving their piercing sting in the glance of every spectator. A hard and grim old man, stricken in one of the few places where he could feel the hurt in his own heart, his look came to rest at last, squarely on the face and in the eyes, fire to fire, of the able young ranch foreman against whom he had made the charge of murder.

Hate, rancor, defiance, relentless vigilance in search of advantage had been for years the feudal habit along that line which separated the two great ranch outfits, war and watchfulness, killing fights and constant suspicion their interchange. Now it had gone too far. They had laid a charge against a man who was innocent.

"Wayne," the rancher grumbled in something of the voice of one of his old bulls, "I reckon you needed hanging—I 'low a man ain't much good if he don't now and then deserve a neck-stretching. At the same time, it wouldn't be any satisfaction to me getting the wrong one for killing—murderin'—leaving my boy daid with no chance ag'in a bullet from behind. I don't aim myse'f to take better than an even break. I've noticed—in these difficulties and meannesses of ourn, the Two-Track Dollar and Bar-Question shootings and one thing and another—it's all been cards faces up and above board. The plays have been fair. I kind-a 'low I owe you an apology, even if you are a dog-gone bunch of wild and woollies—Huh! Judge!" he turned to the bench, "I'm plumb sure I was mistaken, now. I ain't up on the legalities, but if you'd sort-a turn that kid loose, shake off the sheriff's irons, or whatever is the lettin' go 'cording to law—I'd take it kindly. Shooting from behind ain't Wayne's way, for a fact."

"Certainly!" the judge exclaimed, "You—" he turned to Judge Lipsum.

"We consent—naturally!" the counsel for the prosecution remarked.

"I'll take the case from the jury, order a verdict of acquittal entered and discharge the defendant from custody," the judge said.

There was a quick, general yelping here and there in the court room, which subsided as Foreman Wayne Putnam jackknifed to his feet, whirling toward the old man, who now was stooped again in hopeless realization of his son's loss. The two came together, their hands smacking with the energy of their clasping. Right there the old feud ended.

"If you'll get my employers to let me off a few weeks, I'll go riding," Putnam said, tersely, "I know Avile. I never did like him. He's sure heading into the Purple Shadow Hills—Derry Linden and I'll go get him, or bring him out."

"I'd thank you—kindly!" Baler nodded, and the two rode away. The surprise of Avile was complete, and the capture easy. He hadn't anticipated pursuit. They brought him back on Roy Baler's horse, and then justice was done enthusiastically, and with great promptness.

Moreover, it was according to united public sentiment.

II. THE SHERIFF'S EDUCATED SON

SHERIFF BYRON KEEFE of Plato County was large of frame, competent and domineering. He had been elected to put an end to lawlessness from Mica Waters to Hard Hack Range and across the Broken Lands Basin. His success had been marked, though not quite complete. Organized beef stealing, range wars and outlaw bands had departed, but here and there a skulker slipped into sporadic opportunities for mischief and only a good man could have kept the peace as well as Keefe had done.

Keefe had one son, Browning, who spent most of his youth going to school and college and recovering from the effects of colds, fevers and skin troubles. At twenty-two the boy was tall, thin, rather pale. He was educated mentally, broken physically and shy of heart. Keefe put him at work on the sheriff office books, time and mileage-keeping for the deputies, recording the disposition of department .30-30 carbines, checking up meals for prisoners and looking after all the accounts. Browning worked at desk and typewriter day after day, nominally a deputy sheriff but actually a kind of office odd-jobber. None of the hard, husky riders presently hesitated to tell him to clean rifles brought in dirty, or to run over to the café and bring a piece of pie with coffee for the tired heroes of a long ride.

Down stairs in the court house was a long cellar. Here were stored various things belonging to the county, and here in some long forgotten day the board of supervisors had outfitted a shooting gallery along the west wall. A target was at one end, a counter at the other end, and the earth, a long 'dobe wall partition, with other mufflings made the gallery silent under gunfire. For years no one ever used the gallery. Some of the deputies didn't know it existed. Only one of the officials considered it, Browning Keefe.

The youth had gone out to practice over on the creek bottoms when the sheriff and his deputies went on an official county picnic. The nerve-wrack of years in school and its side-line ailments left Browning's hands trembling so that he missed every shot with a county .45 revolver, and he excited laughter, creating a tradition, when he tried to work a county carbine, not knowing how to throw the lever below the last click, to lift a shell into the chamber. His fellow deputies cut a large, leather medal out of an old boot leg, and pinned it on the office deputy's coat lapel—The Booby Tag.

Browning Keefe had learned one important thing in his previous life—to think through to the end. Presently he went down into the court house basement, wiped the dust off the gallery electric globes and cleaned away the debris. No one paid any attention to what he was doing. He took pains not to arouse any curiosity about his activities. He sent away East to a revolver factory, famous for the fine machine work on its productions and bought a 26-ounce .22 caliber rim fire revolver. He sent to other revolver makers whose specialty is weapons which will stand all kinds of abuse—and still be ready for business when the time comes that one gets down to it. He bought 5,000 rounds of .22 caliber long rifle ammunition for his revolvers, and every morning, before he sat down at his desk, he shot ten shots from each revolver, alternating them in his hands. Every noon, he fired twenty more shots, and every afternoon, at the end of the day, he shot five shots from each revolver—a box of fifty shells every day. He aimed every shot the best he could to hit.

The .22 caliber long rifle shells made less sound than booted footsteps on a floor, even in the gallery. No report's reverberation ever passed the closed door of the gallery. There wasn't another person in the county who knew that the sheriff's son was shooting more than five times as many shots every day as any other man in the county. Three months after he began to shoot, when he had only 500 shells left of his first 5,000, Browning Keefe received 10,000 more, and kept right on shooting, with steady, methodical persistence. He had learned in school the value of practice.

When he had shot his 10,000th shot, and he had not missed the black of the two-inch bull's-eye at seventy-five feet in the gallery under the court house in six hundred shots he belted on the standard .45 Colt which the county issued to deputies, and making sure no one else was in the building, he wore it down stairs after the day's work was done.

The last time he had fired it was out at the department picnic when he hadn't been able to hit a mark three feet square at sixty feet. He reflected with some bitterness, that there had not been one working day when one of his smart fellow deputies did not come over to where he was sitting at his desk and make some wise remark about the deputy sheriff who couldn't hit the size of the fattest man in the whole county with the weapons of his business. He had not once made a tart reply. His own father thought he was afraid to resent the insults. The word had gone around town that Browning Keefe was soft.

Now in shooting the .22s, he had made it a point to draw and fire each shot with each revolver for five shots each day, one after the other. The last ones of the afternoon. They were six shot revolvers, but he preferred the decimal system of keeping track of his shooting, for a box held 50 shots.

The big .45 Colt, Frontier Model, was in its holster at his hip, an open, fast-draw standard Cheyenne sheath. He had kept the holster oiled, slick. He had cleaned and oiled the revolver every week, regularly. It was with its 6-inch barrel, nearly forty ounces in weight, fourteen ounces heavier than the light weapons with which he had been so steadily practicing. But he knew the weapon's feel, from often handling and cleaning it. He stood with his hands up, palms forward ears high, facing the target, and the weapon at his hip.

When he snatched it, his palm audibly slapped the grip—the shot, as the muzzle cleared the holster, just scratched the top of the rather high counter in front of him and hit the target plumb-center. He had made one of the prettiest draws ever thrown in the county. He fired next and in the same second, perhaps, from the elbow and the third aimed from the eye level. Then he worked the big .45 with his left hand, and when he had shot the twelve times he had decided on he stood leaning with his hands on the shelf staring at the target twenty-five yards distant, blinking. He was the best shot at a target in Plato County—and he knew it. His draw was smooth, fast, graceful.

THEREAFTER he continued his .22 caliber shots at the target. He slipped away on Sundays, riding out of sight of town, over into rough country, his three revolvers hidden from view till he was away yonder and all alone. He took there the natural targets from lobes of prickly-pear or spots of color against pale backgrounds, shooting at all angles and up to a hundred yards.

There were rattlesnakes aplenty over around one small mesa. He ranged there and snapped his .22s when he spied one of the running brooks of horror, so that as he rode on horseback he could dot the arrow-point heads between their eyes. He could clip away the rattles with one shot of the .45-six-gun, and then cut the head off the other end. Aiming, he found did not help him in accuracy. He did better work pointing than when he took the extra time for pains. By that fact he realized he was a natural gunman. He proved it over and over again flipping his guns right or left on jack-rabbits as they stretched clear above bush or through openings in the rocks, his practiced, instinctive firing driving the projectiles into what he looked at, though his hands were thirty inches out of line from his eyes.

His hands no longer trembled, but none of the men who taunted him noticed that. His skin was a pale tan, instead of a sickly tawny, though no one observed it. Around town in Plato Court, everybody saw just what they were accustomed to expect. They were seeing a memory and not the actuality, though none knew it. Browning Keefe did nothing to break their illusion. His father paid almost no attention to him, rather disgustedly throwing him the accounts, bills, data to be filed, or otherwise attended to. The youth gave no sign of his feelings, now. He was no longer exclusively the product of educational institutions.

The book-deputy, the others called him. Just to carry on the idea, he sent away and bought books on gun practicing and the science of criminal procedures. He stood them across the back of his long, wide, flat-top desk and presently when there were a score of these volumes, the undersheriff, Rink Kluck, a tall, red-haired, freckled-face fellow with an enormous nose, huge, flexible hands and the manners of a range heifer at a screw-worm dipping, happened to notice the row of titles at which he squinted, blinking and spelling out the hard words.

"Keys to Crookdom," he read whispering, *"The Female Offender, History of Small Arms, Use Book of the Forest Reserves, Six Years with the Texas Rangers, Life of Captain Bill MacDonald, The Cowboy Detective, Vigilante Days and Ways, Hell on The Border—"*

"Hi-i!" Kluck shouted. "Learnin' how t' be a dep'ty sher'f from liter-chewer, eh? Hi-i! That's bright, that is! That's the dad-blamdest idee I ever hear'n tell of—Hi-i!"

He whooped and invited all to hear, and while he yapped and yawed, Browning Keefe's gray eyes did not once leave their stare at his superior officer's greenish grayish pupils and iris.

"By gosh, here we've got the only 'riginal—uh—" Rink Kluck's wandering glance had come around at last and bumped into the pointed look with which the victim of his tormenting now met his jeering grin. As Kluck lost the thread of his yell, the department bookkeeper said, sharply:

"Kluck, this is my office. Here is where I 'tend to my work. I know my business as well as you do yours. You're interfering with the performance of the duty of a public official. If you haven't got anything better to do than interrupt my doing of my work, while you are loafing up and down, you'd better hand in your resignation and spend your own time, instead of the people's as you are doing now."

It was for a fact Browning Keefe's office. It was interfering with public work. Some of the listeners realized that the deputy-bookkeeper was telling the truth. The undersheriff was one of the best thief trailers, peace officers and most reliable men in the county—but Browning Keefe had steered him right plumb into a stone wall that stopped him short, stunned and helpless.

As they backed away, he added:

"Just remember, this desk here is my private, confidential, sheriff office business. You mind your end of duty and I'll 'tend to mine!"

"Yes, sir!" Rink Kluck smacked his lips, deprecatorily.

HOURS later some of the men who had been thus unceremoniously evicted gathered down at the Buffalo Gals Dance Hall bar to drink and talk it over. They wondered if the boy had been drinking, and got his Dutch and dander up thataway? Whatever it was, they were angry. Browning Keefe had insulted them. They didn't have to take insults from any one. They decided they would go over to the court house in the morning and tell the smarty what was what, but at 7:20 o'clock in the morning, word came on the telephone line from the T—T ranch that all the cattle in the Red Flat pasture had been stampeded and more than twenty rustlers had been seen rounding them in to drive up into the Hard Hack Range.

Telephone central passed the word on to Sheriff Keefe who immediately sent Browning riding to three of the deputies' homes, where there were no telephones, while he called up all the others, to meet the exigency of fighting the number of men who were racing away with—the sheriff knew—more than two thousand five hundred head of cattle. Then he called up for special deputizing all the other good men he could think of at the moment, including City Marshal Phelps.

People went out to watch the possemen riding away as fast as they could make ready. It was nearly forty miles over to the T—T ranch, and every one had heard a lot of trouble was on over there. Indeed when Sheriff Keefe tried to get the T—T again for particulars central reported that some one had interrupted the woman who was talking, and throwing the instrument down, apparently pulling the wires out by the roots, the last thing heard being a man's curse.

No time to waste! The biggest raid in years was on. The best horses, the best men raced to the rescue and the grim sheriff himself plowed along, passing his drawn out posse as his magnificent horse outran the best of them.

Plato Court by ten o'clock was settled down. The sun was hot. The town was deserted. The county judge, the coroner, the prosecuting attorney, other lawyers, had gone on with the others, hastily adjourning the day's calendars. All the others could do was sit around in a siesta mood and wait for news.

Browning Keefe would have gone with the rest but his father said, "No, check up on special deputy appointments, and post your books. That's what you're good for—that's your business, you know so well! Besides I need your horse for a real man."

Rink Kluck had protested to Sheriff Keefe about the insults visited on a first class, reliable undersheriff by the bookkeeper deputy. Good and knowing in the field work of the department, Kluck's knowledge was too little, his intelligence too limited, to realize his own whining when the boy turned the tables on him, smearing him with the joke. It takes more than a sense of humor to make good with the brawny, courageous bullies of the borders.

Just before twelve o'clock, Browning Keefe looked at his wrist watch. This had been a source of merriment and contempt—that lady's wristlet. He glanced around, saw that he could go to dinner and as he stood hesitating, a curious sensation assailed him. He remembered that his father had called on every good man in town. Even the city marshal and his assistant had ridden away. He weighed the news as he heard it. Where could a score of cattle rustlers come from? Where could they take two thousand or so head of cattle with any hope of profiting by it? He whistled, caught up his big county .45 Colt by the belt and hooked on another, left-hand, holster with a spare Smith & Wesson six-gun on the other side.

He hurried through the main sheriff office into the corridor of the court, snapping the lock as he went. He ran swiftly out onto the court house balcony and looked across the plaza to the main southwest corner.

Down the wide, dusty street from the timber line mountains of the west he saw coming swiftly six men on horseback. Sure enough! They came to the Plato County Bank and five of them lit running from their saddles, while the sixth rider held the bridles, his head turning as with his right hand on his out-flaring gun grip, he swept the quiet, sleeping stores which on all four sides fronted Court House Square.

Deputy Sheriff Browning Keefe had not foreseen this. He had merely looked forward to a day when all the county officials and their families and all their constituents would go out on the next annual picnic at the creek, and he would be challenged to shoot and show 'em how to miss. He had practiced shooting against that time—more than 30,000 shots with his .22s, and now some 2,000 with his big gun.

But the challenge had not come from his own fellow officials. The Black Wing Mob of holdups had slipped a thousand miles to trick the rich Plato County and loot the one bank of two thousand ranches of its boasted, huge, ready-cash and negotiable assets—half a million, the deputy sheriff, the one official within thirty miles, by that time, had heard casually. The ruse had succeeded. It had fooled every one. The president and cashier of the bank had both gone riding, for they were right good men with rifles. Somewhere the telephone had been tapped.

After all, Browning Keefe was the old sheriff's son. The honor of the department, his father's job—the pride of the hard-bitten, rough-mannered, thoroughly competent sheriff, undersheriff, and deputies was as live and honorable in the bookkeeper as in the boss himself.

"Here goes!" Deputy Keefe exclaimed, "I've got to take the first shot!"

That was another thing. Sheriff Keefe never shot first. The evidence must be clear, the crime cinched, before he went for his gun—and he had fired men who didn't stand up to the legal code as he understood it to be. There were no less than three women, five or six ordinary men and a girl or two who saw Browning Keefe streaking it straight at the bank. They felt his urgency. They noticed his long, free hands swinging. They were all puzzled by that cavalcade of six men. Not one divined the situation till suddenly the man on horseback flung forth his gun and began to shoot. Deputy Sheriff Keefe's suspicions of a bank robbery were thus verified. He had on his badge, and he was in his shirt sleeves.

One bullet came by him, a second was passed by his own as he ran. The outside man toppled as he dropped his revolver and sagged, with both hands pressed against his breast in the pitiful weakness of those shot through. The outlaws' horses plunged, scattering as the bandit's revolver went off again when it struck the ground.

The gunfire brought two of those inside to the door and somehow the deputy saw into the shadows and with a double shot cleared his way past this second line of crime into the ornate, marble reception room. He slithered sideways out of the light and stood sweeping the scene with his wide angled eyes. He spied one of the raiders down the line against the *Mortgages & Notes* doorway—beat his shot with his own and then left-handed to the forehead of the bag-filler over in the cages.

Then he headed along the line for the vault. He now had five down, and the sixth he met with both hands full of the bank's cash in reserve, and a cubic foot or so of bonds in a bag.

"Up!" he ordered.

The bandit looked past Keefe and saw two prostrate men at the door, inert. He saw outside in the white glare of the street another of his comrades, a black shapelessness with a purple shadow. He turned and glared through the holes of his Halloween mask.

"Sure, kid!" he nodded, lifting hands as the wheat bag of loot dropped to the floor, adding, "They said you'd be all there was left in town—they said you couldn't shoot—my God!"

SHERIFF KEEFE led his posse to the T—T ranch. He rode up to a scene of cattle country peace and industry. Over to the northward was the Red Flat pasture, with the dust scufflings of feeding herds across the vast distances toward the Hard Hack. The owner of the ranch, Simon Farles, looked down the slope where for ten miles he could see coming a string of riders.

"Howdy, Sheriff!" Farles asked. "What's all the parade about?"

Keefe wiped the dust from his face, looking at the telephone wires, long-cutting southward to the railroad, first.

"Can I use your telephone?" the sheriff asked.

"Nope," the rancher shook his head. "Out of whack. Tried to get central yesterday mornin'— Nary a whisper. But *what* the hades, Keefe?"

"One of those damned cowboy jokes, Farles, and when I catch him, and the woman who helped him—u-h-h—" Then the sheriff took it out in loud, long, picturesque cursing and gesticulating.

All the rest of the day the emergency posse came stringing in. It was funny—Not too damned funny, of course; just funny. Especially the two bankers, the county judge and several leading merchants who hadn't ridden—to brag about—for some years, had their ideas about humor, true, middling and false. Farles rejoiced. He hadn't had such a herd of visitors, not since—when was it?

"An' say," he laughed, "lucky I killed a nine months heifer yesterday, not exactly beef, but too good chewing for veal—all cool, now, and ripe for a barbecue."

So they had a pit-roast, and sat around in the warm night, a heap of cedar roots and stumps flaring high, telling stories, harking back, looking forward—prodding one another about this time when and that time, he must remember—things soft tongues can repeat in the wide lands in hearing of the coyotes rejoicing on the knolls out around. And the ranch slept them, later, in the sheds and under the wagons, in a tier or two along the floor in front of the fireplace inside. One banker slept under the blanket with the man who once had loaned him six bits, and the sheriff was under a blanket with a man he had tried to convict of murder—and was glad it couldn't be done.

In the morning they headed away homeward, twisting in their saddles. Some walked to ease limping horses. Farles, chuckling, carried several in on two buckboards—account of that's how they felt. The posse kept together going back. They ate down at the half-way Wet Sands Spring. They arrived late in the day at Plato Court, and they found everybody at the Plaza, they thought to welcome the capture of cattle thieves. Instead, a woman ran out to greet and jeer the sheriff.

"Keefe!" she cried shrilly, "The Black Wings came ridin' in yesterday noon and raided the bank!"

"*What!*" a dozen posse voices shouted, the bankers turning pale as they leaned to hear, "Did they get the stuff?"

"They did not!" the woman replied, "Dep'ty Sher'f Keefe shot it out with them. Five are in the mortuary. Magpie Jack's locked up in the jail!"

"Browning shot it out—you say?" the sheriff asked, his voice thickening. "He's —he's all right, Jennie?"

"All right! All right—I'll say sure Sheriff! He come across the Plaza there, he knocked the look-out down, dropped two as they blanked the door, went inside and got two more. The other, Magpie Jack himself, quit. Hands up—he did! Browney did it!"

"Where is he?" Keefe asked, then bit his lip. "Where is—is my son?"

"On duty—same's ever—bookkeeping. Figurin' the rewards I expect!" the woman laughed, and the crowd yelled for joy.

The sheriff pulled his tired horse to go up to the big court house tie-rail. Three or four others started to follow him, but men of finer feeling checked these with a quick lift of the hand. Every one knew how Keefe had felt about his boy. They didn't want any one to horn in on their meeting, now.

The sheriff went slowly; he dismounted easily; he walked with his shoulders squared up the balcony steps through, the corridor to the door marked in gold on black;

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

There he hesitated with his fine right hand on the knob. Presently he entered, softly passing through into the deputy-bookkeeper's den. Beside the wide desk with the books along the back was Deputy Browning

Keefe writing a straight, delicate, copperplate entry across a ledger line. Hanging on a black hook, handy at the window frame was a wide belt, with a row of brass cartridges and two huge holstered revolvers, cleaned. The boy froze as he caught out of the corner of his eyes sight of his father's familiar boots. Embarrassed, he held quiet.

"Browning—where did you learn to shoot?" his father asked.

"Why—" the deputy-bookkeeper reached into the back of a large bottom drawer and drew out a bag containing two gallons or so of empty .22 caliber rim fire shells, some of his empties. Keefe ran his hand down into the bright copper tubelets.

"I see!" the sheriff said, turning away. That was all he would say about it—ever.

But when the crowd came, Keefe revealed to Undersheriff Kluck.

"Go over to the hardware store and get some glass goldfish bowls."

"What!" Kluck's lower jaw dropped, and then he saw the bags full of the empty .22s, as well as two thousand or so .45 Colts—all empties. He knew what the bowls were for then. The undersheriff blinked, rolled his greenish gray eyes a time or two and walked over to the deputy-bookkeeper, hat in hand.

"Uh—Mister Keefe!" he greeted, "I was wondering—you know—about if you had any books for learning sheriffing. You see—" he grinned engagingly, "my eddication ain't be'n neglected as much latterly as it used to was! I know, now, I need lessons."

There was a laugh. It was short, though—there still remained a lot of serious business to attend to, keeping the records straight, inquests, and so on.

III. A DEVIL OF A JOKE

STEVEN BARNONE arrived in Tieropes, a hard, weathered, honest man. He talked little. He worked first at carpentering, and then built some new loading pens for the railroad. He rode a while for the Wine Glass Brand outfit, and when Sheriff Ledwing took him after the gang of cattle thieves who were running nearly two hundred head of two year olds into the Sunset Range he kept close up with the posse leader and in the fight at the Swim Crossing, Barnone's .45-90 set a-foot every one of the rascals, and dropped two of them besides. Ledwing persuaded Wick Culbers to let Barnone go in and be undersheriff.

For five years Barnone did the dirty work. He went out and served notices. He chased banditry. He took word to the rough and raw that it was time to let up, calm down and behave. He killed nine men, and brought in a good many cripples. He made no mistakes and even when Long Hy Plates stormed into the sheriff's office in the county court building at Tieropes, declaring that he would kill the man who tried to serve the warrant for his arrest, charging misbranding calves, Steve Barnone crashed the rancher up against the wall, put a pair of handcuffs on him, booted him into a cell and turned the key. And three days later Long Hy was begging for a drink of water, and sipped the first cupful out of Barnone's hand, without biting, but saying he liked it. The rancher had been difficult for Sheriff Ledwing to handle, but Barnone took Plates into court and testified that he, personally, had caught Plates with four calves whose mothers had been driven into loose quicksand and sunk.

Plates made one surge up and bellowed "You're a li—li—uh—"

"Don't call me a liar, Hy," Barnone remarked as the rancher's tongue faltered, "You take my advice and plead guilty." Plates had promised to kill the undersheriff. He had made similar threats good in the past. There was only one man in the whole county who wasn't afraid of him—and under the cold pin-point stare of the official witness sitting there in the court, Plates ended his career as a bad man, whispered to his attorney who instantly interrupted the proceedings with the request that his client be allowed to plead guilty, admitting that he was a shameful stealer of baby beef.

Sheriff Ledwing retired for age at the end of this term and Barnone was nominated by so many votes that it amounted to election, also. The new sheriff worked with three men instead of five. He cut down the mileage fees a third, and his men made more money. There was plenty of work to be done. Two feuds were smoking over in the southeastern part of the county. The Sunset Range was the refuge of outlaws who worked throughout the states to the north and west. Railroad and express companies came in and gladly paid all expenses, including $3.50 a day for Sheriff Barnone and his men, saving a poor county a good deal of taxes. And every one wondered to think that this could be true in a land where the extravagance and even the crimes of officials made hard lands worse to live in.

No one knew where Steven Barnone was born. The voters didn't know whether he was Yank, Middle West or Western. People said he talked so little nobody knew his dialect. He brought the first typewriter into the Wild Block of counties, and men brought their families in from ranches fifty miles away, begging him to work the hand-printing machine just so the boys, girls and women could see him do it. And Barnone never refused. The only sign of tenderness he ever showed was toward the little chaps, boys and girls among whom he would sometimes sit on his heels talking in low and nonsensical terms which the little ones understood perfectly, and yet never repeated as though his confidence were not to be violated.

Tieropes was clean, from the county court to the outlying boundaries. There were difficulties. There were troubles. There were disputes. But in three killings and five cases of mussing, the victors in the combats—two at dances, three in saloons, the others at local round-ups—immediately headed for Tieropes to surrender. All in seven months. And not one tried to run away. Instead they came in and told their sides of the stories.

"I was drunk, Sheriff," Jerry Creley said, for example, "I disremember exactly what happened. We was all drinking. If I was to blame, all right, Mr. Barnone. I 'low yo' better go ask them others, as saw the difficulty. Hyars my gun—I ain't touched it."

Jerry's victim died. Sheriff Barnone told the court he believed it was just a lot of cowboys who didn't know what they were up to, since it was drinking-meanness, and according to the looks of things it wan't intended murder, but it was manslaughter, unintentionally, criminally, careless. So Jerry went to jail for a year. He slept there every day, too, but during the night he worked over in the Screen Window Hotel, as porter, so he could earn money to take care of his victim's widow who married again just before Jerry came clear, relieving him of responsibility for her.

A STERN, cold rectitude, a face with hardly a smile, a personality of utter courage and no humor, apparently, were the honest qualities of the sheriff who fairly and squarely administered the affairs of the whole region. Men came to take their medicine because those who tried to get away, or who undertook to shoot it out with him, were caught and if necessary killed.

"A man'd ought to face the music," Sheriff Barnone declared, "If he ain't willing to pay the price, he hadn't better patronize the counter for outlawry, that's all. A square man may not always go straight, but where he cuts around, he's willing to accept the rough going to pay for the fun he gits out of his trespassing."

"Just what crimes do you commit and what outlawries do you enjoy, and pay for?" Hattie Strebow asked him, saucily, one night over in Straw Hat Charlie's dance hall.

"I've paid a plenty," he replied, quietly, "I've taken my medicine, same as I mix for others."

"I'll bet some woman made you poney up in the first place!" the girl laughed.

"I wish you wouldn't hit me there, Hattie," he begged her gently, "I'm—well—helpless about women."

"Sheriff!" the girl cried, tears in her eyes, "I'm sorry—honest! I was only foolin'—I'm 'shamed—an' I never thought I'd be 'shamed again. Will you forgive me, Sheriff?"

"Sure!" he smiled, ever so little, "I'd have to anyhow, you know."

"I know!" she nodded, "a woman always does. I was mean—I won't be again—not to you!"

The sheriff had never talked personal that way with any of the kindly Tieropes girls before. They had all been afraid of him. They had walked with exact Spanish formality while he was around. Now they opened their hearts to him. They gave him tiny attentions, perhaps a bunch of flowers after a cloudburst, or they sat down and talked to him a minute or two, or they carried delicacies over when one of his deputy sheriffs was hurt—favors as sweet and womanly as could be, things which money could not buy nor custom bring. And on a Saturday night when a burly fellow, Big Luck Dinswill who owned the Keyless Dance Hall knocked down Lucy May, one of his dancers, Sheriff Barnone took the brute to the edge of the desert and told him to go, and he went, forty miles on foot in July to the next town, while his dance hall crew fell heir to his place. In another county this action would not have stood examination; in Tieropes it exactly met the exigency.

One day a youth came to town, dusty, thirsty, hungry. He was broke, but luck favored him. The Screen Window Hotel, owned by Buster Stovel, needed an odd-jobber, and the boy, giving the name of Tip Jones, went to work. He cleaned sand boxes, wiped dishes, carried loads of bedding out to air, and did not even hesitate at things he did not seem the kind of a man to do. One day a roll of bills was left under a pillow in a bedroom by a cowboy, and Tip was among those questioned. A faint cloud hung over him, he needed money. For weeks he was under surveillance, but was either too sharp to spend it or he was innocent. He became night clerk, and one morning a man who had come in reeling drunk claimed he had handed Tip his roll—$550. Tip said the roll in the safe was the same as the one handed in, $98 in one and $5 dollar currency.

Sheriff Barnone studied the young fellow more closely, cross-examined him sharply and saw something in the man's eyes which puzzled and angered him. Flat denial was the suspicioned boy's only answer, and inquiry around disclosed the fact that the accuser had lost about $350 here and there. He could have spent, been short-changed and had his roll switched for the rest. But perhaps Tip Jones had peeled a bit for his own, too.

A stranger came in on the stage, went into the hotel and in about two minutes there was a sound of fisticuffs, scuffling, a hot fight. When a rush to see the fun arrived they found the newcomer knocked senseless, his face badly bruised. He was good, too, strong, healthy and agile—Tip Jones had whipped him so badly he was an hour coming around. And no one had known Tip was that bad. Looking through his room covertly, Sheriff Barnone found a .38-40 Colt revolver, belt, ammunition—a fast, well-worked holster. But neither Tip's picture nor description fitted any of the hundreds of reward notices in Sheriff Barnone's office.

A norther howled dismally and dustily out of the open high country. Long Hy Plates had come in the day before, and turned cattle over to the Wickser Brothers' buyer, taking $4,390 cash. He spent some money, perhaps the $90. He was drinking, and in spite of remonstrance, headed away for home at about 11 o'clock at night, facing the cold, yellow dust and coming needles of snow. He was shot down in a clump of junipers just north of town, and the money taken with its horsehide belt from under his checkered shirt, but over his woolen union suit.

Sheriff Barnone found one bullet lodged against a rivet in Plate's heavy leather gunbelt. The other bullet which had hit him also entered the back and went upward through the lungs and out through the upper rib. The killer must have run up behind the drunken man and shot him from on foot. The recovered bullet was a .38-40, well mushroomed, but unmistakable.

BARNONE hung around the Screen Window hotel all that day, and that night he found the youth's revolver with two shells empty in it. He did not find the money, but it could have been hidden out. The proprietor of the place, Buster Stovel, had been the partner of the now exiled Big Luck Dinswill of the Keyless Dance Hall, but years before a row had split them. They had not fought, but they were bad friends. Stovel met Barnone in the corridor.

"I thought I saw somebody coming in," the proprietor remarked, "I'm sort-a keeping my own eyes open, too."

"Know this gun?" Barnone asked him.

"Can't say I do," Stovel shook his head, ".38-40, eh? I like a .45 better, myself. But I guess it does business, all right."

"Yes, it does business," the sheriff nodded, as he spoke, and going down to the office, snapped handcuffs on Tip Jones while the boy caught his breath, staring.

"What—what's this, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Murder of Hy Plates. Don't talk, unless you want to. Is this gun yours?"

"Why—yes," the youth nodded, "that's mine all right, but I never used it much. I've a little one in my pocket—"

Barnone went for it. Stovel laughed loudly. The weapon was a .22 caliber but had a special rim-fire shell and a 6-inch barrel.

"I know that .22," the Sheriff looked at the youth, squarely, "it's a real shell."

"Yes—it'd surprise you—I've killed coyotes and a deer."

"You can shoot this—that straight?" Barnone asked.

"Oh, yes!"

The case was clear. It just happened two cowboys had seen a man drop from a shed roof back of the hotel to the ground, about ten o'clock. That shed was under several windows, including the hotel clerk's. Jones had gone to bed early, before ten o'clock. Stovel and a cowboy remembered that. He said he went to sleep immediately. He declared he hadn't looked at his gun in a week. He was dazed when a bulge in the carpet under his bed yielded $550, exactly the sum the drunk had claimed he had left with the clerk. The $98 had apparently been a sop to him. The drunk came, looked at the $550 and remembered it, sure he did!

Indictment was followed quickly by a trial. Sheriff Barnone managed the case, marshaling the evidence of witnesses, which the prosecutor brought out. The frank and open face of Tip Jones would be a first class asset to any thief. He sat grim and helpless, manacled and trapped. No one ever escaped from Sheriff Barnone.

Conviction with sentence followed. Hanging, of course. The sheriff ordered 6 x 6s, 2 x 4s and planed planking for the gallows. No use to put the building off, and he'd have to do some figuring getting the trap right and everything according. While he was studying his mechanics, being a carpenter and feeling competent in the construction, one of the girls in the Keyless, Lucy May, for whom the Sheriff had struck a blow, went over to look at the prisoner. When he looked up at her, utterly hopeless, impulsively she reached her hands in sympathy for the good looking youth. He talked to her. He told her things he had told no one else. He told her more than he knew, even.

Lucy May went to Hattie Strebow gasping and weeping.

"My God, Hattie!" she gasped. "The sheriff's going to hang his own boy! He come West, looking for his daddy—and it's —it's Barnone!"

There was a tombstone tattooed on Barnone's chest—and that was the one sure thing Tip Jones knew by which to identify his father but he had not yet seen it. In an hour the news had flown all over town—the sheriff and the prisoner didn't know, but every one else did. And Hattie went with Lucy May to tell the condemned prisoner.

"He's my father—but my father's name is Henry Bossfeld!"

They described the tattooed monument in memory of the man's mother.

"Don't—don't tell him!" the prisoner begged. "He'd do it—hang me anyhow! Don't let him know. I'm framed somehow—I didn't do murder! But, for God's sake, don't let him ever know I'm his son!"

NO ONE told. The chill of a terrible apprehension ran through the community. Under the wailing blatancy of the dance hall music the men and women forgot their own mean affairs, struggling with hearts and minds against the horror for which Sheriff Barnone slowly and relentlessly planned as duty bound. Hattie Strebow and Lucy May, one who had hurt the sheriff with a jest, the other a girl who had been saved from a wretched bully by him, set their souls against the thing. They believed the boy, intuitively. The county court seethed beneath the surface, as hundreds restlessly, night and day surrounded the implacable, relentless, utterly honest, unsuspicious sheriff with their opposition and sympathy. He was square, hard, honorable—and they learned how much they loved him for his integrity and for his code of honor, as he drew unconsciously near the abysmal tragedy.

A thousand schemes to save the boy were proposed. A petition for pardon by the governor was frantically circulated. Sheriff Barnone opposed it and stated alone the plain evidence, backed by the transcript, and even when the governor heard the horrible truth, such was the influence of the sheriff that the pardon could not be forthcoming. Justice must be done! The evidence was plain, simple, convincing.

Then the chambermaid in the Screen Window Hotel whispered in Hattie Strebow's ear that Buster Stovel, the owner, had a wad of $4,000 hidden in his room—with blood on one corner. Hattie instantly took the girl to Sheriff Barnone, who had at last decided the exact model for his gallows, and was shaping it up for the next Friday's job. Barnone listened, leaning on his clean, bright saw which bent as he gazed at the two girls with his gray, pinpoint eyes.

"Sure of that, Jane?" he turned to the chambermaid. "All right. I like that boy in there. I hope we can save him! Where's Buster?"

"Drinking heavy, but not his own liquor," the girl replied.

The sheriff went to the hotel. He found the wad of currency. It was behind a loose baseboard. The money was identified at the bank as belonging to the rancher who had been murdered. Then it was found the screen in the boy's room window could not be pushed out without breaking it. Stovel's own screen was fitted with hinges and hooks and easily swung clear.

White-faced with horror at the thought of this near hanging of an innocent youth, Sheriff Barnone headed to arrest Buster Stovel. The hotel owner saw him coming, recognized the purport of that terrific expression and went for his gun. He went down, shot not through the heart, but much lower.

Before he died he could tell the truth—and he did to save his soul. Even then the wretched killer did not tell the sheriff the facts about the prisoner—his efforts to find a father who had fled, mistaking her sailor brother for his wife's lover.

"We don't want a pardon for the boy," the sheriff told the governor, personally. "We want a new trial."

And Sheriff Barnone went on the stand and coldly recited the facts, the new evidence he had obtained, the wrong which had been done innocence by failure to notice the significance of the nailed fast screen, with the natural suspicion directed against a stranger, whose .38-40 the cunning scoundrel had used to cover his own dirty work.

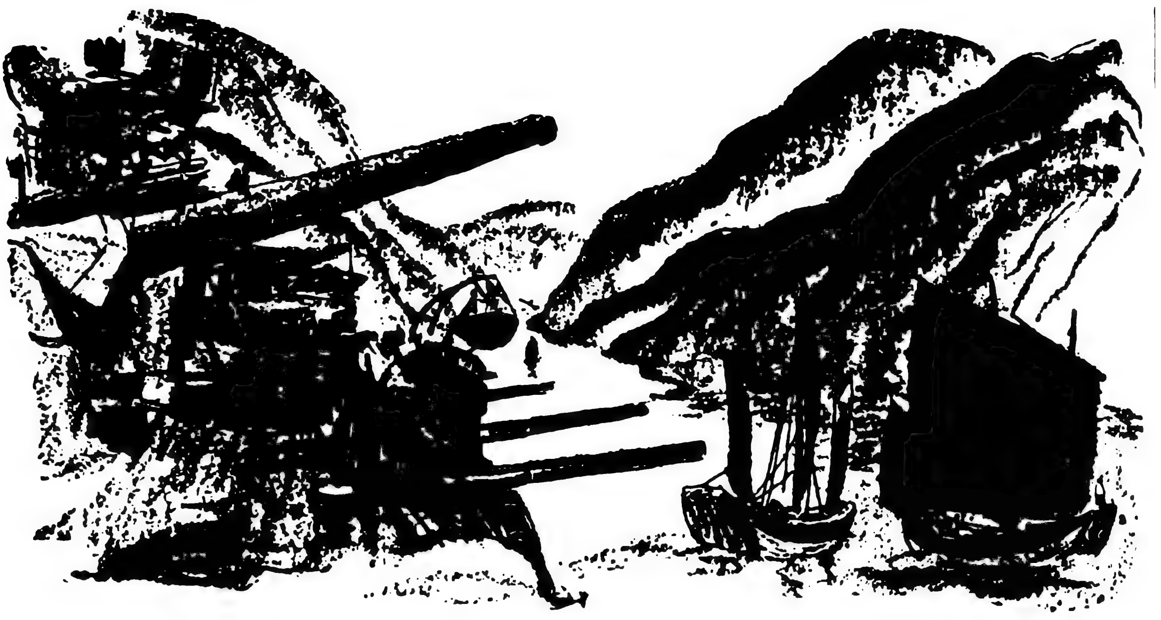
Acquittal followed amid the acclaim of the audience. The youth, all clear, went to the sheriff.

"Sheriff," he greeted him, "I was adopted by Shannon Jones to be his son. 'Bout a year ago my mother came to us. She's running a store over in a place called Mohawk Flats. A long time ago my daddy saw her brother kissing her—he's a sailor, and my father lit out. His name was Jerome Gaines, and on my father's chest is tattooed the tombstone of his mother's grave."

"Jerome Gaines!" Sheriff Barnone staggered back, his face convulsed, softened. "Your mother's brother? An' I near hung you—my own son!"

He collapsed in the arms of Hattie Strebow and Lucy May, his head on the chest of his son. He had suffered, he had steeled himself against the cruel blows of his own mistakes. But he had done what he believed a man should do, standing four square for his high code of honor. And Tieropes, which had made him sheriff, and his son who had found and brought him back to his own, were proud of him.

"But," Hattie Strebow cried, "wouldn't it have been a devil of a joke if he'd gone and hung his own boy?"



IN THE angrily swirling flood of the mighty Yangtsze-Kiang some thousand odd miles inland from the Yellow Sea, the little gunboat Newark, of the U. S. Yangtsze Patrol, tugged doggedly at her anchor chains. It was just after the noon hour. With the bubbling activity that a hearty meal seems to generate in the very young and the carefree, her bronzed, white-clad bluejackets romped about the top-side as joyously indifferent as the goats that skipped along the face of the rugged cliffs just back from the river bank. Suddenly they stopped in their play; gazed wonderingly as a shallow drafted Gorge steamer flying the Stars and Stripes came in sight rushing down stream with the current, toward them. Their wonder changed to excited interest when she made a sweeping turn, anchoring a short distance away, and the boat that was hastily lowered, headed for the gunboat's gangway.

Below in his cabin the lean-faced, serious eyed, gunboat skipper sat gazing dreamily at the picture of a girl on the bulkhead. His was the duty of protecting American interests and shipping in that unfriendly, bandit-infested region of China that knew no law save that of force, but at that moment his responsibilities rested lightly on his youthful shoulders. Interests other than his own were farthest from his thoughts when a clatter of feet on the ladder leading to his quarters quickly brought his mind to the alert.

"Sir!" the orderly gasped as he swept aside the swaying curtain and rushed into the skippers presence, "The officer-of-the-deck says to tell yu' the Chinese shot at the Wu-Shan 'nd—."

"Wu-Shan!" the skipper interrupted, whirling about in his chair, "Why, she just passed this morning up river for Chungking!"

"Yes, sir, but she had to turn around—she's anchored right behind us—a woman was killed," the orderly paused to gulp, " 'nd the captain was all shot up. He's on deck now, wantin' help."

The skipper leaped from his chair and went boiling up the ladder with blood in his eye.

"Shooting Americans, are they?" he gritted, "Well, I'll show 'em—if I hang for it!"

Striding over to where the bandaged-headed merchant captain leaned weakly against the life-lines, he soon learned the

Red Tape
and
Black Tea

A Story of the U. S. Navy in China

By

POLLOK GUILER

essential facts of this unprovoked attack.

"Officer-of-the-deck!" he barked, when the other had finished describing the incident, "Get two machine-gun crews ready to leave the ship immediately! I'll give 'em something to think about—stopping our steamers!"

Long anxious for an opportunity of this kind, the fortunate men chosen to guard the Wu-Shan on her trip to Chung-king and back, dashed excitedly about equipping themselves for this dangerous mission. Muttering savagely to himself, the skipper strode up and down the tiny quarterdeck in angry impatience until the men were reported ready.

"Embark 'em!" he snapped, and as the men tripped down the ladder to the waiting boat, he roared after them:

"Shoot hell out of them if they fire on you! Shoot hell out of them!"

And they did just that. The bandit general who had fired on the steamer that morning with such deadly effect, grown bold by his success in turning her back toward Ichang, foolishly had his men in an exposed position along the river bank when she returned late that afternoon.

The skipper knew nothing about this however, and during the ten days that elapsed before the Wu-Shan returned down river, he gave but little thought to his precipitous action in sending an armed guard on board a merchant ship without first obtaining the admiral's authority.

"Nothing will come of it," he thus brushed it aside when it came to his mind at all, "I'll say nothing about it, and when the men return, report the whole thing at once. No use worrying the old man," and let it go at that.

He was on deck, though, when the returning heroes came along side and clattered over the gangway, grinning up at their ship-mates, who, but for their captain's presence on deck would have been yelling derisive greetings. But there was a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach which deepened as he listened to the exultant report of the petty officer in command, and the smile of pleasure that he forced for their benefit was a sorry affair.

"Fine work, men! Fine work!" he congratulated in a strangely hoarse voice. "Guess that'll teach 'em a lesson," turning away with a grim face leaving the men to their envious comrades who immediately crowded about them.

In the seclusion of his cabin the skipper sank weakly into a chair.

"Great gosh a'mighty," he gasped, "mowed 'em down—twenty-five or so—nary a one got away—" the petty officer's words rang in his ears. He could see the whole thing in his mind's eye as clearly as though he had been there. The little steamer breasting the swift, yellow current. The unsuspecting bandits firing a ragged volley. Machine guns blazing from the upper deck. The survivors, stunned with surprise, throwing aside their rifles and making a wild dash for cover only to be cut down by the deadly stream of bullets. "Great gosh a'mighty!"

Drawing a pad of radio blanks toward him, he seized a pencil and with fingers that shook, hurriedly drafted a message to the admiral giving the bald facts. This he shot down the tube to the radio room before he should be tempted to alibi himself.

"Guess that'll make the old man flap his eye-winkers," he chuckled, but there was no mirth in it.

GAZING sightlessly before him, his mind wrestled with many possible consequences of his act. He had violated the basic principle of his profession in taking an unauthorized step that might seriously involve his country with a foreign power. If the Chinese authorities insisted that the men killed were authorized government agents; troops authorized to stop vessels, by force if necessary, to carry out customs inspections, and not bandits, then he was in an awful position. He could see the admiral, aghast at his insubordination, rushing off a radio message to Washington, to the State Department. Himself, tomorrow at the latest, receiving orders to proceed to Hankow for a general court martial. Then kicked out, disgraced, for doing his duty. The cold sweat started on his forehead at the very thought of it!

"But what the devil else could I have done?" he questioned hotly, squirming. What could he, indeed? Americans had been killed and wounded, and the merchant captain had asked for assistance. There was no question of contraband—of customs! Purely a murderous attack from ambush, and the skipper's duty was clear. He had acted immediately. With one slash he had cut the red tape of officialdom and came to the rescue of his fellow countrymen and their legitimate business.

"Great God!" he burst out, jumping to his feet and walking rapidly up and down, "Isn't that what I'm here for? If they don't like it, they can go straight to hell—all of 'em!"

This outburst seemed to quiet the skipper's jangling nerves even though it did not entirely calm his troubled thoughts.

"Well, I'd do the same thing over again!" this defiantly as he filled and lighted his pipe. "Black tea, as the men call it, is at the bottom of the whole thing," he soliloquized, settling himself again in his chair, "and so long as they make the infernal stuff—which will be always—we'll continue to have trouble. Yes, sir!" his voice had a suspicion of bravado, "I'm glad things turned out as they did!" but for all his seeming indifference, he didn't sleep very well that night, nor for several succeeding nights.

The skipper was right—probably more nearly right than he realized—when he said that opium was at the root of the trouble, for in that section of the upper Yangtze valley, opium was king. Every inch of tillable ground was given over to the cultivation of the poppy. Even the tiny valleys that bit timidly into the base of the rocky cliffs, waved white in the sunlight like a cotton field in bloom. Little did it matter to the military governor that the sorry looking, coolie farmers, who, at the point of a bayonet went about the back-breaking task of collecting the wax that oozed from the bruised bulbs, should starve during the coming winter. The missionaries would look out for them, at least they always had, and his profits would be all the greater.

Neighboring governors equally grasping, set up customs stations at frequent intervals along the river, collecting tribute from everything that floated past their frontiers. Boats having opium on board were confiscated and their crews sold into slavery unless an impossible tax was paid, nor were the river steamers plying through the Gorges excepted. Unless a gunboat were within ready call, they would be boarded in mid-stream, the officers and crew threatened and the passengers terrified. Opium was always found because the wily crooks would plant it there. Then the steamer would be tied up, her cargo looted and the captain held as hostage until the matter should be settled.

Appeal to the governor was hopeless, naturally. He would sympathize, declaring stoutly that it was the work of bandits, and promise to send soldiers to apprehend them. There the matter would rest until a gunboat came to the rescue.

It was things of this nature that the skipper of the Newark had to contend with. Making "look-see" trips up and down the river investigating reports of trouble and difficulties with the local authorities, the days passed and still no word came from the admiral. He grew apprehensive and indignant by turns. His morale was beginning to weaken. If his firm stand were not upheld, his prestige, gained by prompt action, was lost.

"SECRET code message, sir!" the radio operator broke in on his troubled thoughts one afternoon when they were anchored off Yo-Chow, near the entrance to Tung-Ting Lake.

The skipper looked up with a start.

"Now what the devil did he use that for?" he queried, glancing at the number of letter groups arranged in neat rows up and down, "Wh-why, it'll take me an hour to work this thing out!"

"My God!" he gulped after the radioman had gone, "Secret code! This must be serious!"

Closing the door of the cabin, he fumbled with the combination to the safe. His brain ran riot. There was something wrong. He could feel it in his bones. Apprehensively he eyed the innocent looking groups of letters that might mean so much. "Destroy it," a voice whispered, but with jaw set he began his task.

Under his painful manipulation of the deciphering machine and nervous thumbing of the code books scattered over his desk and bunk, the message was unfolded word by word. The look of mounting incredulity on his face swiftly changed to consternation when from the jumble of letters and syllables linked together across the page, the completed message leered up at him.

"Wh-what in hell is this all about anyway?" He read the message again, carefully.

"Authorities insist you are smuggling opium," it ran. "Have ordered investigation."

"Smuggling opium—me? Why they're crazy!" he cried in a strangled voice, wide eyes racing helplessly about the cabin, then back to the inoffensive sheet of paper that rattled in his hand.

Then something seemed to click in his brain. His eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

"That's Heflin's work," he said, "The dir-ty skunk! Gets on the admiral's staff with a string of chicken-guts (aiguillettes) around his shoulder and you'd think he was God A'mighty. Now he's making use of his official position to take a slam at me for reporting him that time for being absent over leave on the Galveston—" His voice trailed off into a savage mumble.

Turning to his desk, he searched hastily through the papers there for the message that the operator had brought him in order to check up on the reference number which appears on all Navy messages as a means of identifying the sender.

"Well, he should have had sense enough to tell the admiral better," he growled grudgingly when he saw the double zero heading the group of figures which indicated clearly that the admiral himself had sent the message.

Savagely crumpling the paper in his hand, he cursed softly, and with a zeal for detail that was surprising. Nor did he slight anybody. He, Lieutenant Snyder, U. S. Navy—smuggling opium! Placed in a class with dirty coolies and bootleggers! His hands clenched. The pipe-stem between his teeth creaked in protest.

With an angry sweep of his fist, he cleared the litter from his desk and hurled the deciphering machine and code books clattering into the safe, kicking the steel door shut after them.

"Let 'em investigate and be damned!" he snarled in impotent rage, storming up and down in the narrow room.

In the tiny pantry just off the cabin, Mo-Ling, the skipper's cabin boy, ceased his singing with a squeak not unlike the turning off of a cheap gramophone as the sounds of the skipper's violence reached his attentive ears. Thrusting his closely shaved head through the opening crack in the door, his inscrutable black eyes rested on his irate master.

"Get out!" the skipper growled angrily.

Mo-Ling's yellow face beamed with indulgence. Ignoring the danger signals in the other's face, he opened wide the door and shuffled nonchalantly into the room.

"Long time I sabby master," he gurgled, opening a locker beneath the skipper's bunk and taking a package of tea from the large supply he kept there, "Ketchie tea chop, chop now," and again beaming on the skipper, shuffled quickly out to his pantry. If the skipper's worries troubled him, there was no indication of it, for no sooner was he outside than he sang again in his squeaky falsetto while he moved efficiently about his work.

It may have been a love song that Mo-Ling sang for the shoe-button eyed lass in Ichang—daughter of the wily Chop-Lee, comprador usually but opium dealer and suspected bandit when business was bad—or, it may have been a hymn of hate for the foreign-devils who sent their gun-boats to interfere with Chinese justice and graft. One never knew, and one guess was as good as another.

"Bellie goodie tea, master," Mo-Ling was back again placing the steaming tray before the glowering skipper. "Ketchie upliver plovince; all same send my father Shanghai-side."

"The devil take your father!" the skipper snorted, mollified somewhat by the boy's attentiveness. Grinning broadly, Mo-Ling darted his sharp eyes about the cabin and silently backed out.

Peering reflectively into the bottom of the cup as he sipped, Oriental fashion, the fragrant, Sze-Chuan tea, the mountains that reared themselves in the skipper's mind a few minutes before had now diminished to mole-hills. The wild, unreasonable thoughts that had coursed pell-mell through his usually orderly brain had given way to a rational view and he was almost his natural self again. He realized too, what common sense should have told him in the first place: That the admiral was referring to his ship and not to himself, individually.

"So the authorities insist, do they? Humph!" he grumbled, "what authorities?"

His anger threatened to flame anew when he realized that the admiral had ordered the investigation on the word of the Chinese politicians who had caused him so much trouble and worry, and who would not turn a hand when the shoe was on the other foot.

Suddenly an idea flashed across his mind.

"That's exactly what they've done!" he spat with the conviction of certain knowledge. "Those yellow crooks have planted opium on this ship as sure as shootin', and when the investigation comes off, I'm the goat. The slick yella scoundrels—they've certainly framed me nicely!"

Reaching over to the side of his bunk he pressed a call bell.

"TELL the executive I want to see him," he snapped when the man on watch came to the door.

"Executive's ashore, sir!"

"That's right, he is." The skipper remembered now, thinking for a moment, "Then tell the navigator to come up here."

The orderly departed.

"We'll see how far they get with that game!" the skipper muttered, rising and pacing up and down excitedly, "I'll beat 'em to it!"

He knew that he was unpopular in bandit and smuggler circles on account of his activity, and they would be glad to see him well out of the way. They might go to any extreme, he thought; kidnapping, or a crack over the head in a sampan. He'd have to be careful!

"Don't know whether the U. S. would pay such a big ransom for me or not!" he chuckled.

He was interrupted by a rap on the door and a tall, young officer entered the cabin with a "what have I done wrong now" expression on his sensitive face.

"Ah—Thompson," the skipper was arranging some objects on the top of his desk, "there's rumors that somebody is smuggling opium on this ship."

Ensign Thompson's face went white and he gave a guilty start. "I don't know whom to suspect unless it's the chink servants we've got, or some of the pilots. Anyhow I want a sharp lookout kept and all packages coming aboard examined. It's a big temptation you know, and some of the men might be slipping some on board to take down river."

Strange he hadn't thought of this before, the skipper thought. "Why, the profits must be staggering—and so easy, too."

Aloud—"I don't want this to get out—

and keep your eyes wide open!" sharply.

"Aye, aye, sir!" the other gulped, and left the cabin as softly as he entered.

"Timid lad!" the skipper thought, "but he'll get over that," and immediately forgot him.

He didn't forget about the impending investigation, though! That worried him. Even though it should disclose nothing, the widely published fact that he had been subjected to an official thing of this sort wouldn't help any in future assignments to duty, and it was his ambition to get command of one of the new gunboats soon to be commissioned to operate through the Gorges.

Suppose he should be ordered to an inferior position on one of the ships in the Asiatic Fleet that hung about Manila and the southern Philippines the year round?

The thought made him shudder. His worried eyes could not meet the brown ones that gazed down at him from a picture on the bulkhead. She was coming out from the States in the fall, to marry him in Shanghai, and the Philippines were impossible!

"No!" he decided flatly, "I wouldn't ask Miss Devil herself, if there is one, to go to that place."

THE next few days were unpleasant ones for his crew. The skipper personally assisted in a minute search of the ship, delving into places that he had never entered during his eighteen months on board, and bag and bedding inspections were held daily. Every package brought over the gangway was opened under the searching eyes of the officer-of-the-deck, and mysterious bulges in the clothing of returning liberty men had to be accounted for.

The skipper was in despair. Not even a clue had been brought to light.

"If there's any dope on this ship, I'll eat it," he told the executive one day in exasperation, "I'm almost beginning to suspect myself. We've searched everybody and everything but the officers, and—"

The executive stiffened.

"Don't think you need go quite that far—sir!" he interrupted coldly, and walked away.

"Don't you?" the skipper chuckled grimly to himself, "I don't want to, but—"

An ugly suspicion had thrust itself up in his mind and would not down. He wagged his head sadly.

"No, you can't keep a half a dozen polo ponies on an ensign's pay—even in China. Not with a dependent mother!"

The skipper had learned this by overhearing bits of a conversation on the bridge that morning while sitting in the chart-house. He had paid no attention to it at the time, but now, the scared, guilty face that he had seen in the mirror over his desk a few days before—

"Orderly! Tell the executive officer and Ensign Thompson to come to my cabin at once!"

The orderly jumped as at the lash of a whip and clattered down the hatch that led to the ward-room.

"I searched the men—and now I'll search the officers too, I'm not lookin' for any cheers when I leave this packet!" the skipper declared hotly, and strode into his cabin.

"Sit down!" the skipper invited gruffly a few moments later when the officers appeared.

Ensign Thompson nervously sank down on the edge of a transom, and with lowered eyes, began carefully to examine his cap.

"I prefer to stand, thank you sir!" Thus the executive in a quiet voice.

The skipper shot him a burning glance.

"As you wish," he said with cold politeness, turning toward Thompson.

"Thompson," his voice was gentle, appealing, almost, "I don't wish to appear personal, but I must ask you a few questions."

The young officer swallowed with an effort. Meeting the skipper's eyes, he quickly looked down again.

"I am not making any insinuations, neither am I accusing anybody, but—but—" the skipper hesitated, "you know about this opium thing?"

The cap dropped from Thompson's hands and rolled unnoticed on the deck. His face was as white as the paint on the bulkhead. Slowly he nodded assent.

"You are spending a great deal of money —far more than your salary. Where did you get it?"

The skipper could not meet the look of helpless appeal in his eyes. In the quiet that seemed to shriek about them, the groan of a pump in the engine room far below, sounded like the roar of turret guns.

From nervously moistened lips, the answer came in half whisper.

"With all due respect, sir, I decline to answer!"

"My God!" the skipper gasped inwardly. Then aloud:

"You decline to answer? Well—you are making it difficult for me—I'll give you one more chance," looking questioningly at his junior.

The voice came again, low and distinct: "I decline to answer!"

"Very well!" the sharp voice of the martinet cold and bowelless, rang harshly, "Mr. Executive Officer, search this—ah—officer's room!"

Silently they filed out of the cabin and below. The skipper stood in the doorway of Thompson's state-room while the executive went through everything with a thoroughness that would have shamed a customs inspector hoping for promotion. The desk safe which Thompson's nervous fingers opened with difficulty, disclosed nothing save the usual confidential pamphlets and official signal book. Thompson, himself, called attention to a large roll of bills tucked away in one of the pigeonholes.

"Nothing contraband, sir!" There was a look of loathing in the executive's eyes as he faced his superior, "Have you any further suggestions?"

The skipper was non-plussed. He didn't know whether to be glad or sorry that the search had yielded nothing. In any case, he had laid himself open, and the coldly courteous tone of his executive stabbed him.

He shook his head in the negative, and in spite of his will to say nothing, instinctively muttered a half-way apology for his action. A dull stare was all he received in return.

Returning to his cabin, the skipper carefully reviewed his actions. He had done the proper thing, according to Navy Regulations, but by so doing, he had alienated himself from his officers. He could see the whole intolerable situation, as it would become: Himself, a pariah on his own ship. His orders carried out to the letter, mechanically perfect, but no loyalty or shipmate spirit without which a man-of-war may become a hell for the skipper. The cold official politeness in all conversations and the hush that would greet his appearance. The comradely intercourse with his juniors on expeditions on shore. All this would be denied him, nor was he wrong.

THE days that followed were agonizing. He was left strictly alone as he had anticipated and the suffering was acute, but the skipper never lost sight of his determination to get the information and idenity of the smuggler before the investigation. Thompson, he still kept an eye on, but no further clues were forthcoming, until one night he was dining ashore at the hotel with the postmaster, his guest suddenly asked him, nodding toward a man seated on the other side of the room.

"Isn't that one of your men, skipper?"

"What the devil?" the skipper exclaimed, "That's our mail orderly! Now what is he doing in civilian clothes—and a dinner coat at that? Why, that's contrary to regulations!"

"I thought I recognized him," the other continued, "He's been cashing some pretty husky postal orders from Shanghai lately, and I wondered—"

What he wondered, the skipper didn't hear. Quick as a steel-trap his mind had grasped this new clue. What a fool he had been! The mail orderly, of course, and in his stupidity, he had never suspected. How easy it was for him; going ashore at will with his mail pouch slung over his shoulder, bringing the opium aboard a little at a time, keeping it in his safe, peddling it up and down the river. The skipper gasped as he realized the perfect ease with which this could be accomplished without suspicion. Then he had another inspiration—the sealed bag of U. S. mail that was sent to Shanghai every week!

Muttering a hurried apology to the postmaster, he made his excuses and hurried out. He would say nothing to anyone this time, and catch the mail clerk red handed!

Jumping into a sampan at the jetty, he started out to the ship. Gloating over his luck in chancing upon such valuable information, he failed to note that there were two men on the same sampan instead of the usual one, until, from the corner of his eye he glimpsed on the surface of the water the shadow of a crouching figure behind him. Acting instinctively on the impulse of some sixth sense, the skipper threw himself backward and under the protection of the bamboo matting shelter. Nor was he a split second too soon. A heavy club swished downward cleaving the air where his head had been a moment before with such violence as to wrest it from the would be assassin's grasp, and go ricocheting from the bow of the sampan into the water.

Without arresting the impetus that the backward fling of his body had given him, the skipper turned over like a cat and threw his arms widely for the pair of legs that he knew were close behind the shelter. Not for nothing had he rowed in the winning Navy crew at Poughkeepsie! Human flesh could not withstand the mighty wrench that he exerted, and with a scream of agony and fear, the sampan man clutching wildly, went overboard into the swirling current, taking part of the bamboo matting with him.

The Chinese at the scull seeing that things were going against their plans, dropped his hold on the oar and made frantic efforts to loose a bamboo pole fitted with a murderous, steel point and hook at one end, and bring it into play as a spear, but the skipper sensed this move. Grasping the end before the coolie could shorten his hold sufficient to make a jab, the skipper now partially erect, gave a vicious yank, drawing the other down toward him with a rush. As the coolie fell toward him, he let drive with all his might, straight at the middle of the naked torso. With a grunt, the sampan man doubled up and slumped down in the bottom of the sampan like a bag of bran.

Wild-eyed and panting, the skipper glared about him, the boat hook grasped in his hands prepared to repel boarders. As he drifted with the current, another sampan that apparently had been following, turned quickly and sculled rapidly away.

"Guess you won't cause me any trouble, you yellow scum!" he growled after taking a careful look at the inert figure in the bottom of the sampan, and placing the boathook in a readily accessible position, grasped the sculling oar and took his bearings. He saw the string of lights that marked the Newark's gangway sweeping down upon him with a rush. He must at least get close enough to hail the man on watch, and putting all his strength into his awkward, but effective strokes, he succeeded in fouling the gangway platform and sprang aboard.

"Now, damn yu'," he gasped, shaking his fist toward the sampan that was rapidly whirled away by the current, "let's see yu' scull back after your nap!" and on shaking legs, slowly made his way up the ladder to the quarterdeck.

Safely back in his cabin again, the skipper gave his mind to a scrutiny of the recent developments in the situation that confronted him. Try as he might, he could not decide whether the sampan incident was simply one of robbery, or whether it had been prompted by the opium smugglers with a view to getting him out of the way. At any rate, he would make a careful examination of the mail orderly on the morrow, and regardless of the outcome, would be a bit more careful regarding his own safety. After an unfruitful search for the key to his cabin door, he propped a chair under the knob, and then making certain that his service pistol contained a clip of live cartridges, rolled wearily into his bunk.

NEXT day he was in the mail orderly's office before that person could have a chance to cover up his tracks and take the evidence ashore. It was the skipper's duty to examine the accounts occasionally, but heretofore he had delegated that authority to the executive, so his presence as inspecting officer was a bit unusual. The mail orderly, however, accustomed as he was after two cruises, to queer notions on the part of skippers, opened his safe without hesitancy and broke out all the moneys and other odds and ends that go with a small postoffice on board a man-of-war, for the skipper's scrutiny. Standing respectfully to one side, the mail orderly watched the skipper as he checked the accounts, and carefully perused the names in the record book of packages sent out. His own, he saw, appeared several times, but checking back in his mind against the dates set down in the record book, the skipper remembered the trinkets, odd commissions for friends in Shanghai and Manila, that he had sent out, and to all intents and purposes they tallied.

"Hm-m!" he muttered finally, "this seems to be in order," then watching the mail orderly closely, snapped, "what's that?" pointing to a filled mail bag that was under the desk.

"Wh-why," the other stuttered, "th-

that's the bag of sealed mail for Shanghai."

"The postal authorities and customs don't open that do they?" the skipper questioned exultantly.

"Not till it gets to Shanghai!" looking questioningly at the skipper.

"All right, break her out. I want to see what's in it!"

"Well, I can tell you what's in it. There's—"

"Break it out, I said! Every damned bit of it!"

White with anger at the skipper's overbearing manner and language, the mail orderly hauled the bag forth. Violently ripping the seal from the bag, he opened it and dumped the contents over the desk and deck in a confused jumble. Standing to one side well clear of the scattered letters and packages, he returned the skipper's angry look, glare for glare.

"Lock the door!" the skipper thundered, watching the other suspiciously while he did so, then "Now you sit right over there," indicating a stool in the corner of the room farthest removed from the only exit.

Under the glaring eyes of the mail orderly, the skipper examined every letter and packet that the bag contained, ruthlessly breaking the seals on those that could have possibly contained opium even in small quantities.

"I'll have to make a report of this—" the mail orderly began.

"Report and be damned to you!" the skipper snarled, starting up and assuming a threatening attitude, "Get busy now and repack that bag!" and throwing diplomacy to the winds, utterly, burst out,

"I'm on to you! Who is your confederate in Shanghai? The bird that's sending you the postal orders. Answer me!"

The blank look on the man's face turned to scorn.

"My brother's sending me those checks!" he contradicted stoutly, "I've got money invested in his business," and ignoring the skipper entirely, began sullenly to repack the mail bag.

That was a facer for the skipper and it left him cold. He remembered now having heard something of the sort, but then, he thought, one can hear most anything, so he disconted the truthfulness of the statement entirely. One thing, however, he couldn't discount, and that was the fact that the enlisted man had him at a decided disadvantage. Glaring in impotent rage at the bent back turned contemptuously toward him, he snarled,

"He is, eh? Well, isn't that nice! We'll investigate that Santa Claus brother of yours, and in the meantime, the yeoman will make the mail trips."

With this parting shot, the skipper, realizing bitterly that he had bungled, and in addition had made an awful ass of himself, flung out of the room before he should further mess things up. That he was on the right track, he felt confident, but where in God's name were they hiding the stuff? Without the evidence, he could do nothing, and time was growing short. Any day now, the ship was liable to receive orders to proceed to Hankow, and he had accomplished nothing save to turn everybody against him.

"There isn't an officer or man on the ship but would be happy to see me soaked," he thought bitterly. And truthfully so there wasn't. His once efficient and happy ship was now a "mad-house." The only thing that kept the crew on board was the fact that there was no place to run to. Once in Hankow— "Mo-Ling might stick," the skipper chuckled wryly, "and the officers, because they have to."

PONDERING his bull-like attempts at detecting, and the unenviable position that his well meant efforts had placed him in the eyes of his crew, the skipper without realizing it, had wandered up the ladder to the bridge. Pacing restlessly up and down, he chanced to glance down on to the forecastle.

"Collusion!" the word seemed to explode in his brain, and with incredulous stare he watched the mail orderly and Ensign Thompson in earnest conversation below. The enlisted man seemed to be insisting on something, while the officer protested, shaking his head in a determined manner. Suddenly, as though the skipper's silent gaze had flashed a light upon them, they looked up. Both stiffened to salute, and separated, both going below decks.

What to do next the skipper didn't know. Of the guilt of the two suspects, he hadn't the slightest doubt in his mind, and from their attitude, he had them worried. He must act quickly!

Dashing down to his cabin, he sent his orderly for the executive officer, but fortunately before he could arrive, the radioman brought him a message which directed that the ship proceed to Hankow. The affair was now out of his hands. He could only report his suspicions to the board of investigation, and let them do what they could.

"No liberty or leave today!" he ordered the executive, handing him the message, "We'll get under way at daylight tomorrow. Make all arrangements."

"Aye, aye, sir!" the other answered listlessly, then, "the mail orderly has put in a request to purchase his discharge. Says he wants to settle in business in Ichang. Do you want to take any action on it?"

The skipper bounded up excitedly. "No!" he roared. "Lock that crook up and put a sentry over him."

The executive's eyes bulged. Had the skipper gone crazy? Should he place him on the sick list and take command himself? These thoughts rushed through his mind as he hesitated in uncertainty. Then realizing that they would soon be in Hankow where he could take the matter up with the admiral, he hurried out, returning a few minutes later to report that the order had been complied with.

"Very well!" the skipper grunted, pausing in his stride as if to say something further, then again, "very well!" as though he had changed his mind, turning away.

The executive left the cabin shaking his head. He had heard about the incident of the mail room, and the desire of the mail orderly to report the ravage of the sealed mail as was his duty to do, but had upon Ensign Thompson's urgent recommendation, agreed to let the matter drop—all of which he had approved. He could not have known of the skipper's having seen them in discussion on the forecastle that morning, otherwise the whole thing would have been clear, and again shaking his head perplexedly, he went about making preparations for the morrow.

Next morning when the executive ascended the bridge ladder to make the last minute preparations for getting the ship underway, he found the skipper, hollow-eyed and irritable, there ahead of him, puffing furiously on his pipe as he tramped heavily back and forth. The Chinese pilot, usually urbane and jolly, was sulking grouchily on the bridge-wing, mumbling to himself. Ensign Thompson who was officer of the deck stood tremblingly to one side, his big eyes staring sightlessly toward the indistinct shore-line.

What had happened the executive didn't know. Taking in the situation at a glance, he saluted the skipper formally, and hailing the forecastle, ordered, "Heave around!"

In the strained silence that hung over the bridge like a fog, the clank of the anchor chain on the wild-cat sounded ominous. The usual heart warming confidence that the skipper had previously reposed in the ability and judgment of his juniors was missing. No sooner was the anchor away than he began countermanding their orders, and elbowed both the executive and officer-of-the-deck aside.

"Get off the bridge," he snapped, scowling at Ensign Thompson, "and send your relief up here!"

White to the lips under this unwarranted and brutal insult to his ability—and second only to a general court martial—Thompson staggered down the ladder to the deck. A remonstrance was on the tip of the executive's tongue, but he clenched his jaws tightly and turned angrily away before he should fall heir to the skipper's displeasure and be "stuck under hatches" also. Taking a station well clear of the skipper's beat he eyed him furtively.

"What's got into him, anyway?" he thought, "and where did he get this crazy notion all of a sudden that everybody is smuggling black tea?" Thus the executive cudgeled his brain in an unfruitful effort to find some reason for the skipper's unusual behavior. "There's something I don't know about," he muttered, completely baffled, then, "that secret code message!" it flashed across his mind like a flame. "I wonder if that could have had anything to do with it—why didn't he tell me what was in it? Anyway, we'll know when we reach Hankow," and feeling for the first time in days, a faint stirring of sympathy for the skipper, he turned his thoughts to his duties.

THE old Newark, ancient rack of bones though she was, aided by the swift current of the river, was "making knots." Sweeping around the sharp curves, a yellow bone in her teeth, one might well have thought that she was impatient to reach Hankow and get rid of the "devils" that had cast a curse over them for the past few weeks. Sampan Chinese, laboriously working their way up river, sculled desperately to get their clumsy craft clear of her charging bows, screaming ancient curses after her as she dashed past them.

Rounding a bend of the river, the frowning cliffs that marked the scene of the firing on the merchant ship rushed down upon them. Scarcely had they entered the narrow channel of boiling water, when there came a shout of alarm from the lookout aloft. The pilot and the helsman ducked quickly behind the protection of the light bridge armor, peering anxiously through the conning slits at the tortuous channel ahead. Nor were they any too soon! The sharp tinkle of broken glass from the bridge windows and the dull spats of bullets against the steel plates followed immediately.

"Machine-guns' crews to quarters!" the executive screamed, dashing breathlessly across the bridge.

"Maskee! maskee!" the skipper ordered, grasping the handle of the general alarm gong that the executive was in the act of pulling, "Do not fire on the dear chaps!" and walking quietly over to the center of the bridge, stood with his head cocked to one side examining a star-shaped, blueish colored spot on the steel mast.

The executive left the bridge with the skipper's chuckle ringing crazily in his ears.

"Place double sentries on deck, and be sure that no communication is had with the beach!" the skipper ordered on anchoring that evening.

They were miles from "no place," having passed Ichang, where the executive had hoped to anchor, earlier in the afternoon. As well have sentries in the middle of the ocean, the executive thought, but under the circumstances, he saw no use in arguing the matter. He did wonder though, nor was the reason to become apparent until later in the evening when he brought the mail to the cabin for the skipper's signature.

"What's this?" he asked excitedly, holding Ensign Thompson's resignation in his hand, and reading quickly.

"I intended bringing that to your attention yesterday, but—" his voice trailed off into silence. Then, after a moment—thinking of the mail orderly—asked dryly, "Shall I place him under arrest?"

The skipper looked up quickly as though suspicioning facetiousness on the part of his junior, only to see his face a perfect mask.

"Yes! Good idea!" came from grim, set lips, "that is, as soon as we reach Hankow. You have the sentries posted as I ordered?"

The other nodded.

"Don't think any of them can make a get-a-way from here, then!"

The cruel chuckle grated on the executive's ears. As he turned to leave the cabin, he observed icily:

"I should hardly think so!"

"YES, he's aboard!" Lieutenant Commander Heflin, the admiral's aid answered the skipper's cold inquiry two days later when he went aboard the flagship in Hankow, "but he's leaving the ship now to return an official call on some of the Chinese authorities. By the way," he added, "he thought that great stuff—the way you cleaned out those bandits."

"Then why in hell didn't he say so!" the skipper broke in heatedly, "I'm not a mind reader!"

Heflin regarded him in pained surprise. "Why naturally he couldn't officially agree with any such action! Officially, he doesn't know anything about it. Here he comes now—come back at two o'clock; he wants to see you!" and as the bugle sounded attention, he dashed down the ladder to the waiting barge.

Moving back, clear of the gangway, the skipper stood at salute with the official party, gathered aft to see the admiral off, while honors were rendered.

After the admiral had been piped over the side and "carry on" had been sounded, the skipper ducked away from his fellow officers as soon as he politely could, and into the flag office.

"What's this about an investigation? Who's on it, and what do you know?" he shot at the junior aide who started up in surprise at his entrance.

"I don't know a thing—except that there is to be one," he answered. "The admiral and Heflin have not let me in on it at all. Seem very close mouthed about the thing. To be perfectly honest, I don't even know what it's all about!" this peevishly as though he resented not being admitted to the official confidence.

The skipper knew that the young aide was not being evasive, but why should the thing be so infernally secret, he thought irritably. This aroused his suspicions, but realizing that he could get no information regarding it until he should see Heflin or the admiral, abruptly dropped the subject.

"Wasn't that Downing," an officer a class junior to the skipper, "I saw as I came aboard?" he asked suspiciously, "What duty is he to get?"

"Makee-learn skipper, I guess," the other parried confusedly, dropping his eyes under the skipper's intense gaze and fussing with some papers on the desk between them.

The skipper removed his cap and mopped his forehead. "Is he my relief?" he asked hoarsely. "Is he to get command of the Newark?"

"Really," the youngster sputtered uncomfortably, "I—I'd rather you'd ask Mr. Heflin about that, sir!"

The skipper sagged back, aghast. It was true then! Cold, bitter rage seized him. "So that's the kind of consideration you get in this outfit!" he thought. "Tried and convicted out of court, and without a hearing! He would fight! He would not be a victim to any such high-handed methods—not him! He would raise a stink that would smell to heaven—"

It is difficult to predict to what wild heights his inflamed imagination would have soared, nor to what length his distorted sense of justice would have gone in retaliation of the fancied wrongs heaped upon him, had not calm reason intervened.

"Of course the admiral wouldn't do a thing like that!" His heart gave a slight jump. "Maybe he was being ordered to Shanghai to oversee the construction of the new gunboats that had been contracted for there! Fool," he chided himself, "you're jumping at conclusions!"

"May I have my boat, please?" he heard his voice asking.

The aide rang for the orderly and directed that the skipper's boat be called alongside. Following the skipper out to the gangway, he asked by way of making conversation:

"How's that millionaire classmate of mine, Thompson, coming on? Suppose he's buying all the junk in China, isn't he?"

The skipper stopped short.

"Thompson—millionaire?" he queried, turning about in his tracks and facing the youngster. "What foolishness is this?"

"W-why, he won the sweepstakes on the champions races here last month! Didn't you know about it? Sixty thousand dollars, Mex, it was," he rattled on enthusiastically.

"Oh, that!" the skipper shrugged indifferently, "That was fine, wasn't it?" and continued his way along the deck to the gangway, but under his breath he muttered a fervent, "Thank God! We'd lose face forever if an officer were caught in a thing like that!" and for the first time in days, his heart felt free.

Then it was the mail orderly after all! Poor devil, the temptation must have been too much. Mixed up with some woman, probably, the skipper thought, as he entered his boat.

PROMPTLY at four bells that afternoon, which is two o'clock ship's time, the skipper walked into the admiral's cabin. His old friend the admiral, who was talking to a civilian, barely acknowledged his greeting and waved him to a seat, continuing the conversation in an undertone. The civilian was listening intently, and every few moments turned his piercing eyes full on the skipper.

"Hope he recognizes me next time we meet!" he grumbled irritably, turning in his chair and looking out the door.

"There'll be no investigation, Captain Snyder!" the admiral's crisp voice brought him up with a start. "We've located the man. This is Mr. Wharton, the U. S. marshal from Shanghai. He will tell you about it," and without even looking again in his direction, he nodded to the marshal and stalked into his state-room.

Surprised and elated over the joyful news that the investigation had been squelched, the skipper could not feel resentment at the admiral's manner, so unusual and different though it was from his habitual, hearty greeting, but smiled understandingly.

"At your service, Mr. Wharton," jovially, "what's the next move?"

The marshal reached for his hat. "I want to go over to your ship and take a look around."

"Can do!" the skipper replied, "Do we hang the scoundrel at the yard arm, or will it be a sunrise shooting?" leading the way out on deck. The marshal didn't answer this sally.

"Is it the mail orderly?" confidentially, "I've got him all locked up for you!"

"No—o, I don't think so. What's his name?"

"Mathewson—Jordan Mathewson. He—"

"Hell, no!" the marshal exploded. "I know him well. His brother too. Is he on your ship? Why do you suspect him?" disgustedly.

"W-well," the skipper puffed as they got into the boat, "he's been receiving some big postal orders from Shanghai, and—"

"From his brother probably; he's quite a rich man in Shanghai—secretary of the race club, among other things. Huh!" the marshal grunted mirthlessly, "that's rich!"

The skipper's head reeled. He was sure that he had been on the right track, and now the marshal's explanation had exploded his best suspicion. All his carefully deduced theories had turned out to be nothing but plain damn foolishness. Shifting uncomfortably about in the boat, he eyed with growing respect the man who could so easily solve a problem in which he had failed so miserably.

"Then who the devil is it?" he asked in exasperation.

"I'll explain when we get there," the other said quietly, not even turning his head in the skipper's direction.

A strained silence ensued until they arrived on the Newark's quarterdeck where the executive officer met them.

"Come up to the cabin with us," the skipper invited after he had introduced the marshal, "and see what a rotten sleuth I've been." Then calling to the officer-of-the-deck, he ordered:

"Release Mathewson from arrest immediately and restore him to duty. I want to see him later."

Leading the way down the deck, the three filed into the cabin. Unbuckling his sword, he threw it and his cap on his bunk, and addressed the marshal who stood alertly watching his every move.

"I'll bite," he said laughingly. "Who's the Raffles?"

The other eyed him steadily for a moment. "Well, I must say you're a cool one!"

"Cool one?" he bristled. "What in hell are you talking about?"

The marshal leisurely drew a package from his coat pocket and thrust it under the skipper's nose.

"Is that your writing?" he sneered.

The skipper examined it gingerly.

"Why, yes! Of course it is!" he admitted belligerently. "What of it?"

Suddenly his glaring eyes widened and his jaw sagged loosely. "W-why, that's tea!" he gulped, stooping down and throwing wide the door of a locker under his bunk. "There's a whole boat load—"

Slowly he pulled himself up and turned a white face toward the marshal who was tearing the wrapping from the package. But the skipper didn't wait. Turning quickly, he made a dash for the door.

"Let go, you damned fool!" he hissed, throwing the marshal crashing over a chair and onto a transom where the executive, aghast at the turn things had taken, wrestled a blunt pistol from his grasp.

"Mo-Ling! Mo-Ling!" the skipper yelled murderously down the passageway. "Where in hell is that boy, Steward?"

The fat steward came waddling leisurely to the skipper's peremptory summons. Thrusting his buddha-like face around the cabin door, he chattered solemnly:

"Mo-Ling, he go shore-side, chop, chop!" Then turning his back on the wildly staring group, he shuffled away again.

"The clever, little, yellow rascal!" the skipper was the first to find his voice, "and I thought I was addressing packages of tea to his poor old father in Shanghai!"

"Yes, so it was!" chuckled the marshal as he gingerly tested an elbow and shoulder. "Black tea—thousand smoke size."

A Story of France and the War and the Long March Home

The Order is: FORWARD!

By A. A. CAFFREY

OLD DREAMS, they say, are best. That's the way with old, old towns; they're best too. Because, if you knew an ancient Main Street from which your path went out, go where you will, old dreams come breaking through.

Even through the present reality—France and the mud. The mud and the long, dark march. A stumbling, splashing march through dreams, and, on every side, the old home town.

On this march, that had stretched northeast throughout the longest day and on and on into the blackest night, was all the old gang from Lawrenceville. Our gun crew, to a man, was from the home ward. The "75" ahead, I remembered noticing before the night swallowed it, was manned by boys from the South Side. The officers in charge, with few exceptions, had first names. We used them—the first names; also, we used the men. So, it wasn't so hard to go ahead. For the gang was there. And the town and old dreams. Why you wouldn't be any place but there! That war belonged to the old bunch. Being with the old bunch, well, it took some hell away!

By keeping a hand on something within reach, you kept the road. Hold onto a tarpaulin. Or a hand on the limber. Steady on the breech or in against the trail. Anything will do, but something. It's black. They never made nights blacker.

Now and then, for a minute or two, the movement halted. Then, heads down and slow, the horses on the next gun, rear, walked right into your lap. Wet hands on wet leather, and you turned them aside. Blowing, and tired, they stumbled and turned willingly. Home town horses, too. Slushing by, heard but not seen, infantry passed ahead through the black. Coming out, relieved, strange outfits brushed by in the opposite direction. And up ahead, for the first time in our young lives, guns rumbled their welcome of intermittent fire. An aurora borealis of hate.

During one of those short halts—it must have lasted for at least four or five minutes—the march, both in and out, had stopped. Only the infantry, beyond the roadside trees, continued in its phantom stride. Busting in, crowding us against the breech, rode a poor horseman on a fine, twisting mount. The headless rider pulled up; the horse wheeled; they fought; the horse danced; nearly straddled the breech; then settled down. With a puffing, spent squawk, the newcomer voiced his bleat:

"Who's in charge of this gun section?"

His answer came in the form of the world's most perfect silence. It isn't military to speak to total strangers; introductions were in order.

"I'm Colonel Bagley," he shouted. "Who's in charge here? How'm I going to get my battery past if you continue to block the road?"

"Pick your damned battery up"—somebody had stepped out of the passing infantry and shouldered by us—"and carry it around!" At the same time, that somebody reached for Bagley's horse, stretched a long arm to its bridle, and turned its head outward, into the great black void. I heard a steel helmet blop-blop across the haunches of the mount, and, plunging, slipping and stumbling, the colonel was on his way. "On your way!" the stranger had bellowed, "The order is: Forward, Colonel. On your way, you loud ——!" Then, back into the passing lines, the unknown went. The night took him. Man, it was fine; Thanks for the night.

Sergeant Barteaux was closer to the action than I. "That was a looie," he said. "Think of a commissioned fillilloo bird taking a chance like that! He'll rot in Leavenworth if they check up on him."

"On your way! The order is: Forward!" That expression was all I could think of just then. One other had used "The order is: Forward!" as his battle-cry, as his boyhood slogan; he had established it as my Nemesis, too. Rubbed it in so that I'd never forget.

Well, the old town and old dreams were surely on the job at that minute. And for a time, the mud and the march and the hell were forgotten.

"The order is: Forward!" . . . It kept ding-donging in my ear.

NEWT CASTLE got that expression from his dad. His dad had been a major in the state militia for so long that I can not recall when he was not such. Major Castle, beyond the age limit when our war came, had been a fine soldier. "The order is: Forward!" was Newt's proudest inheritance.

But Newt Castle and Newt's slogan, back in the old days, caused me to waste no love on him. Of course it was kid stuff . . . just kid rivalry . . . but it had to be. For a long time—I cannot place when it started—Newt and I had been rushing the same girl, Fay Lowell. On into high school, the rushing went. There, not only for Fay's favor but for quarterback honors, Newt and I were opposed. Sometimes it was hard to take.

However, when and while Newt played for Lawrenceville, I did not. Second string was the best that I could hope for against him. Newt was the hardest-running, hardest-hitting, quickest-thinking kid-quarter in years. Three years of Coach Dick Coomb's grooming had developed, in Castle, a one-in-a-thousand high school phenom. When our junior year ended, life ended too. In the next season, our last, I could not hope to unseat Newt. He had a two-way edge on me; Fay liked football.

Then, during the summer, something came about and changed the whole world, brought life and hope anew. The Castles moved down river to the city below, nine miles away, Thornhill. And on the gridiron, Thornhill High was our bitterest rival.

Each Thanksgiving Day the Lawrenceville-Thornhill classic, amounting to an annual massacre, was played. It was the one game in which we could win our school letter. Newt had played in three; not a minute of Lawrenceville-Thornhill play had ever dropped my way. This year, with Newt away, I could hope to qualify.

With Newt out of the picture, I had the position on ice. Why! I could even neglect my studies, lay off training and grow cocky. Yes, with Newt away, I was a pretty good quarter. The local sport sheet said so. I handled the high school sports reporting for that sheet; and I had given Newt a swell write-up when he went down to Thornhill. The next time he started a play with "The order is: Forward!" it would be for Thornhill. And when he started that play, I'd be there to stop it, and the movement—I'd gamble—would be backward. The football season came. Things went fine. But, on the other hand, Newt was also going stronger than ever. The day before Thanksgiving came. The threshold of the morrow, in spite of all my hopes, had no welcome on its mat. Coach Coombs said so.

"When Castle puts you out, you'll stay out," he concluded. As chief and perpetual worrying mentor of Lawrenceville's chambered squad, Coombs was presiding over our last solemn, depressed conclave. Gloomed, we contemplated the scheduled battle of the next day. Sincerely, it seemed, our coach abetted the mental sand-bagging. Our selling price was low, very low.

One by one, Coombs had elaborated the football prowess of each opposing Thornhill player; and always did Coombs praise. Position after position, in every position, we were outclassed. It would take all that we had, or ever hoped to have, were we to stay on the same gridiron with the down-river marauders. And if, he had said, we ever pushed out beyond the short shade of our own goal posts, well—it would be all horse shoes.

"You are going to spend two long halves on defense," Coombs prophesied. "Four or five feet of snow tonight is the only thing that could save us from defeat—but the sky is clear." He paced the floor in contagious despair and concluded, "Thornhill is going to have cause for the greatest Thanksgiving harvest in the history of these schools, and you'll hear 'The order is: Forward!' until your heads swim." He then swallowed hard, swallowed a professional tear or two, and looked very sad. Coaches always do look sad. No coach, to hear him tell it on the last day, ever did turn out a team that was worth the powder that would blow it—well, how can a coach turn out a team without the necessary material!

The year's sum total of universal grief seemed to have been struck in that room. The Lawrenceville squad oozed low into its depths of despair. To each boy had fallen the portentous black hood of dire, drab possibilities, and tomorrow's game was no more inviting than the gallows.

But I got from under that cloud. It was no time to mope and moan. Tomorrow was going to be my day. I'd at least win my school letter, and, with half a chance and any kind of luck on the home ground, perhaps I might romp in with a touch-down. That would mean much in a certain pair of eyes; yes, it would mean everything. Anyhow, Newt Castle could not keep me out this year. Moreover, with Newt down-river, Fay had had more time for me. Nine miles is a great distance in New England, and Newt came up from Thornhill but seldom. Naturally, I neither lost time nor felt any scruple about pushing my case while he was away.

"I'll cheer for both of you," Fay compromised when, for a few minutes before the game, she and Newt and I talked. That's a dizzy girl for you: always playing both ends against the middle. It can't be done that way. Fay belonged to Lawrenceville; she should have screeched that way, too. Not that I think cheering counts. It doesn't. When you are wabbly, swallowing gore and gamely stalling to stay—then it isn't cheering that counts. It's what your lineage has put there that carries you through.

"You cheer for him now," Newt laughed in parting. "After the first kickoff the order is: Forward! Then you'll cheer for me."

That—dirty crack though it be—had the ear-marks of truth. That was why it hurt so. It continued to eat on me through the game.

NOTHING much transpired in the first half, but Lawrenceville was not uppish about it. We knocked much wood and felt mighty thankful.

But Coach Coombs was a punk prophet. In that first half, the Thornhill bunch had worked for everything they got—just experience and fatigue. "You're lucky," was all Coombs said in rebuttal. Maybe so. But—and even Coombs couldn't deny it—Thornhill's was a one-man team, and the one man was Castle. And because of Newt, we had three back-fields always on the job: one in wary action; another being gently carried off; the third, timidly warming up. Miraculously, I had managed to remain in the game, throughout. As I saw it, the thing was a personal duel. Our best men had been replaced by subs. "The order is: Forward!" had started play after play. In some way, I had been stopping Castle's happy, pushing offensive. Goofy and groggy, we faced the last half.

Early in the final half, Thornhill got away to a good start. She carried the ball into our territory from the kickoff. On the next play, just to get all incumbrances out of his way, Newt shifted his team left, then carried the ball single-handed and skin-tackle, to the right and scored. Three of us overhauled and dumped him behind the line and nearly off-side. He failed to kick the goal. Well, a six-point score standing against you is not much until time begins to run out, then, inversely, even a few points appear colossal. Lord! How time flies!

With, and one of, the truculent mob, Fay cheered. I saw her do it. Everybody cheered. It wasn't that the Lawrencevillans hated Thornhill less, but that they loved Newt Castle more. As long as Newt did the winning: Lawrenceville hadn't lost. But, at that minute, the old home gridiron became a cruel torture rack for eleven heart-sick kids. Within those chalkmarks lay our whole tumbling world, then, beyond the timekeeper's whistle, the momentous future, and somewhere, perhaps, seven points. Seven points or oblivion. Well, the load may be heavy, but New England can always add.

Turkey Day and New England had tradition to fulfill, so it set in to rain. It rained as though nothing else counted. The chalkmarks became dots and dashes; little ponds became large—and larger; the mud waxed higher-grade and deeper; but, the game went on as though nothing could stop it. The side-lines and stands were deserted. Fay's shrill, non-partisan voice had yelled for Newt, then, I knew, she has passed out with the other drenched deserters. In the slough of despondency, whistles shrilled, voices gibed and rattled, mud flew, and worst of all—time went on and brought us closer and closer to the final whistle.

"There'll be no turkey for Lawrenceville," Newt had taunted as each play was called. "It's all up-grade now and only a few minutes to go." He grew better and louder as we, and the field, became heavier and worse.

"Five minutes to play," warned the timekeeper; the drowning official seemed glad when he handed down that awful sentence.

At that minute, from our position in midfield, our own goal seemed to be right where we could reach back and touch it; the goal of fading desire appeared as though hardly detectable with long-range glasses. Rain, mud and adverse score may tear down the strongest morale, but schoolboys always hope; even as time goes on, and runs out.

The linesmen shifted their poles and the ball came to us.

On the first play tried, we fumbled. The loose ball bounded my way. Leaden, slipping feet made slow tracks, but I was under way when the final whistle called time. Until they brought me down and that play should reach its completion, we would not be defeated. The game was in my hands. Through a labyrinth of countless tacklers—and a few thousand of my own in-the-way teammates—I managed to skirt the end and pass the line. In the bedlam, Thornhill's halfback on second defense made his try, hit me and slipped away, pawing and clutching like a drowning man. Then, just beyond, angling upfield, came Newt—Newt who "put them out to stay out." But I was heavier than he. I'd stiff-arm him or bust.

With arms spread wide, sure of foot and fast, smiling confidently and discouragingly, he came. I had reached Thornhill's twenty yard line and had nearly diagonalled off-side when Newt let me have it. With a bellowed "The order is: Forward!" that one hundred and sixty pounds of flying high school squirt took-off, left the ground and rammed me at the knees. For a second, I witnessed that lost, helpless sensation of receding from here and moving back and back with no place as a destination. Enblock, we travelled. Then my head hit something hard—a side-line post perhaps—and I went out, cold and quiet.

When I came around, the field was deserted; the last few of my teammates were wading dejectedly through the gaping gate; and the world was all wet, a nasty place in which to be alive. The rain was falling a little harder; the sky, shifting through the pines, could not have been any lower. Nor more dismal. As I remembered it, it was a hell of a Thanksgiving Day, and . . .

"THAT looie had guts," Bart was saying, and, slipping and sliding my itchy face struck his wet slicker as I started to climb his heels. "Off, recruit—that infantry dude was man-sized!" And the mud and the march were back. Home and Newt Castle passed. The night passed, too. And dawn, under a clammy, white fog, came slowly. Within and beyond the fog the Hun.

During the weeks that followed, the war stopped every now and then and they tried to learn who had said, "On your way! The order is: Forward, Colonel. On your way, you loud——!" Every battery in the sector got to know Bagley. Trying to place the voice, he talked with every gun crew, organized a working force of stool-pigeons, turned the war over to his closest handshakers and gave all his valuable time to the sleuthing of that personal affront. It was a way our forces had of retaining command for old-army caste. And Bagley was one of those wormy-looking old-army men.

Our ponderous war machine moved on mighty wheels. But the wheels within those mighty wheels, were little wheels of personal ego. Those very little wheels received first attention. Colonel Bagley, being old-army, was in a position to be heard. Through proper military channels, too.

It isn't likely that Bagley would have ever given up; but Germany did. Crowding the days that followed November 11, we had too much occupying our minds to think much of the colonel.

Another Thanksgiving Day: that of 1918. It is raining again, or, to avoid argument, we'll say yet. The mud is of the perpetual kind, and the sky is where you always found it—on the ground. *Vive La France!*

New England's —th Division was on the move, and the Lawrenceville and Thornhill men had mixed and blended to a certain extent; not, however, to the unmanly degree of agreeability. The blending, here and there, was merely of personnel through replacements. It had not touched the splendid, damned-sight-better-than-thou spirit so essential to, and productive of, lasting sectional enmity. Right here, as an example, take the war: Germany had waged what goes down in history as a great conflict, but when the Lawrenceville-Thornhill factions were thrown together "over there" the Hun prisoners looked on and gasped. Wow! How they fit and bled!

On this Thanksgiving Day, the two old neighbors had planned to replay the annual classic on French soil. All cognaced-up, it would have been a game to remember. But a thoughtful staff sent us down the road on another change of position. Under the circumstances a few minor murders of general staff should have been tolerated, encouraged.

Shortly before dark, we reached the billeting town and broke march. The assignments to quarters were necessarily slow because the ranking officers, fearing the emollient effect on their juniors, were unselfishly, and slowly, locating and resigning themselves to the big French beds; our non-coms, always self-abasing, were picking front rooms near the noisy street, and, in turn, leading the pampered buck to the safe quiet of vista-de-manure-pile surroundings. So, the movement on the road was hitchy. And the rain was hitting on our old steel dips with the monotony of Chinese water-torture. Darkness was moving in and the troops were beginning to weaken. Somewhere the war was over, but, for us, it hadn't taken. No need of rubbing it in, I was plenty sore when the skipper called me out of line.

"Murphy,"—damned if they won't put that name to work every time!—"Murphy," he inveigled, "just wade in there, and wave the rolling stock to slow up; it's pretty deep, and they'll bust axles or mire down."

Where the road dipped steeply into the village and passed, narrowly, between the flanking mud-splashed buildings, a cradle-hole had resulted. It was better than knee-deep in mud and water when, wearing hip-boots, I waded in and began to remember all the things that I was going to say when the war would be over for keeps. It lacked loneliness, otherwise that job was about as exciting as that of bell-buoy in the harbor.

The infantry outfits, with their cigs glowing in the dark, had fallen out all along the line. When oncoming trains rolled down the grade, I exercised my authority; and bucks had little enough of that.

Acridly kidding, the Thornhill battery had come up with biased opinions as to the outcome of the proposed game, had it been played. The tail-end of their march halted near my puddle. I was badly outnumbered, but we Lawrencevillans do not take seconds from anybody when it comes to subtle repartee and the sarcastic handling thereof. So, we chewed the old verbose sock until it lost its taste; some of the infantry, along the opposite wall, had cut in now and then, showing that they were from Thornhill, too. Then came a lull.

Out of that lull, on foot, came Bagley. And the colonel was on his old quest. He slopped around my pond and tackled the Thornhill gun crew.

Leaning against the trail piece of a "75," a Thornhill non-com stood upon what came pretty close to being the only spot in France not afloat. Colonel Bagley, using a swagger stick, eased the non-com into the water and usurped the nearly-dry place. The gun's horses, standing in the roadside ditch, were just about sleeping on their feet. Bagley was questioning much, and, as usual, learning nothing—fast.

COMING through town, head down and chewing on the handle-bars, a dispatch rider sirened for the road. Standing near the near-side wheel horse, where he couldn't see Bagley's position, one of the gun's crew whaled the animal across the shoulder and barked, "Get over." The horse, half asleep, came out of dream fields with a bolt. It plunged to the right, shouldered its teammate, and the latter, being nearly asleep, went down with a thud and, easily satisfied, remained there. At the same time, the pole swung right, the wheels cramped into the trail piece. And Bagley, pinned by the wheel across the midriff, was done for. His eyes bulged in the glow of my red lantern, his mouth fell agape.

"All together!" someone from among those along the dark wall was yelling. "Pick that damned gun up and carry it around—The order is: Forward! Let's go! Over with her!" Under the axle, and alone, the speaker was acting. The gun, already on the tilt, lurched, tottered, then flopped into the ditch. The shoulders that had heaved it went back into the darkness.

"That's the man," I heard Bagley say as he dropped in the mud.

All along the line, back over the crest of the hill, the mud-hens had fallen out and were leaning against the shoulder-high banks of the road's dugway. The line was clear. With no trucks in sight, my attention was upon Bagley and the first aid being wasted upon him.

Idling there, my right foot had poked its way pretty snugly into the ooze, very deep into the hallowed soil of France. Thoughtlessness, perhaps. Damned dumbness I call it!

"Heads up, Yanks!" somebody yelled in warning. Right then I had half a hunch that he meant me. Then all hell broke loose. Where the gang lined the road, a few yards away, a bedlam had broken out. Coming to their feet, or frozen in half-animated postures, men were turning pale. They stood big-eyed and resignedly helpless. And down the hill, with a couple of nut drivers at the wheels, whirled an oncoming staff car in the act of passing an ammunition truck. Jockeying for the road, the three-star car was abreast of the truck in a shower of mud. My position dawned upon me; I was sure a small frog in a small pond . . . And doomed to stay there.

Mine were hip-boots. They were strapped to the breeches belt; no chance to step out and quit them. As for the cars—Neither car could be ditched without doing far greater damage than just bumping me west. They were already focused largely in my pop-eyed gaze.

Well, I didn't do any good for myself. Didn't hope. Nor even pray. When the kill is only a matter of seconds—and dead certain—you'll simply freeze there, look goofy and wait.

But somebody did not wait.

Splitting the crushing second with the staff car, came a flash of olive drab across the mud. That flash of O. D. reached my legs in a hit-and-lift tackle . . . I went up and out of the suction . . . Then, Wham! My head and shoulders struck the solid masonry of the building, and I was out—out, quiet, dazed, and everything afloat.

Semi-consciously, I laid there. They were giving the other fellow all kinds of attention, and letting me lay. That seemed hardly right. I was the one who was all bent; I knew it too.

The medical corps had me quartered for a few days with a sore head, then, after that for weeks, with pneumonia. Nothing was clear. The bird who dived me out of the mud, somebody said, was taken away badly hurt. That was tough, but, in all that post-war movement, I had no way of seeking him out, no way of even saying, "Thank you."

I never rejoined the battery. But I did beat them home.

JUST because old towns are best for old dreams, the Castles have returned to Lawrenceville. The major says that it is the only place for Mrs. Castle because Lawrenceville seems closer to Newt. "Mother," the major says, "finds it easier to smile up here—because it is so much easier to remember."

I had stalled off that visit to the Castles. But Fay had insisted and insisted, said that we were the only ones of the old set who had failed to pay our respects. She came down hard on me; said that, of all the old crowd, I should have been first. When she said that, I could not begin to guess how true it was.

And when at last I did visit them Major Castle read a posthumous citation. One of those brief, belated things which told how Lieutenant Newton Castle, on the twenty-eighth of November, nineteen hundred and eighteen, had, at great personal risk, beyond that required in line of duty, rescued a fellow soldier from a precarious position beneath the wheels of an army staff car.

THE LURE OF THE WEST

I DO not think one can go amiss on a trip West if schedules are ignored and the main thoroughfares are abandoned. Those who play safe never did and never can find the West. Any motive can be good or bad enough, however. The ambition can be a mere pretence and the moral of the effort totally bad. The history of civilization assures us, and reformers are positive that we should be sensible and stick to the right road—but we do not discover the West in that way.

I have rolled thousands of miles up and down the West. I have wallowed through the Texas salt grass mire and in sand storms, alkali clouds, in relentless heat and raw cold. By no stretch of the terms can I link the casual tourist's experience with any such term as profit. There are so many people there now that the large communities are reaching out to seize the waters belonging to the small, and the states of numerous population to take the rivers of the lesser states. Of all the grim struggles in the history of the West the bitterest have been when those frantic with thirst, whether individuals, or outfits or communities have struggled to take possession of the water.

The prophets did not go to the wilderness to live, but only to remain there forty days and forty nights. Having opened wide their minds to inspiration, they returned into the cities and pursued their profession of preaching. My memory is that the practical people did not go into the desert at all, but stayed at home and made fun of those who did, only to be affected by the prophet's inspiration and forced to take it second hand. And I know in my own experience that even though I knew what to expect and had few illusions about actual conditions, as compared to those proclaimed, still the realities were beyond imagination and whether it is a look into the Grand Canyon or the red-rock road over from Strawberry to the Spanish Fork a soul must be dull and prosy beyond belief not to stir to the ringing bells of the fancy when the ears tune into the immeasurable melodies of the desert vibrations.

—*Raymond S. Spears.*

The Siamese CAT

A Story of a Coolie, a Lao Maiden and a Strange and Bitter Revenge

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

NOW the three chief possessions of Nai In Toh, head compound coolie, were a many-colored shirt, a Siamese cat, and the love of a Lao maiden; and the last was the greatest.

The shirt was not as other shirts, which as a rule are plain, drab-colored things, for its sleeves were a vivid orange, its front a vivid crimson, and its back a vivid blue. In fact, never before had such a shirt been seen in the little village of Prayow, and its owner had just cause to be proud, for had it not cost him a whole month's salary and a fifty mile walk to and from the capital, where he had bought it at the largest Chinese store in the crowded, dusty market?

Nor was the cat as other Siamese cats, for, though it had the kinked tail and almond eyes common to its race, yet was its hair snow-white and, withal, as long and soft as that of any Persian. Natives coming in from the surrounding jungle would stop in scores opposite the white gates of the compound and gaze open-mouthed at the apparition, marvelling greatly; even the master and mistress, the Dr. Everett and his wife, would often stoop and stroke the silky, flowing mane as it followed the coolie round the garden.

As for the Lao maiden, she was as sweet a little thing as ever breathed the forest air of Northern Siam, and her name was Me Boon Rawt. In Toh had first met her as she came back home in the cool of the evening from the tiny tobacco plantation which she and her parents had cleared and sown in the heart of the jungle, and which formed the sole means of their scanty livelihood.

Two pairs of brown eyes had looked into one another, and two hearts had beaten a trifle faster. Her's, because of the goodly look of the youth; also, be it whispered, because of the flaming shirt, for what Lao maiden could resist such an appeal of shouting colors? His—well—for him the brown eyes had sufficed, aided possibly by the scarlet hibiscus twined in the long, black tresses that coiled above the shapely head. After that they had met often, and now each knew that their respective hearts were in the other's keeping until that most powerful of all devils, namely death, should part them.

Nevertheless, in spite of these three great possessions, Nai In Toh was exceeding sorrowful. The five o'clock gong had boomed its mellow tones across the compound, denoting the end of the day's work, but, instead of rushing off and bathing in the yellow, swirling waters of the Me Nam at the bottom of the garden, and then arraying himself in the full glory of the shirt for the evening meeting with his beloved, he remained sitting by the fence near the entrance with his face buried in his hands.

For, that very day, while he had been eating his meal in the little attap-roofed shanty that he called his home, Me Boon Rawt had come to him with a tale that had blasted his young life and her's like a flash of lightning on a tree of beautiful rosebuds. For him no longer the joy of walking openly down the jostling market-place with his three great possessions, at once the cynosure and envy of all eyes; remained only stolen nightly meetings at a secret rendezvous in the jungle which, with much weeping and wringing of hands, they had planned that afternoon.

And the cause of all the trouble was Mong Ong Dah.

Now Mong Ong Dah also had three great possessions, though of a somewhat different variety.

These were: a vast amount of money gained by lending out ready cash at the extraordinarily reasonable rate of thirty-six per cent. interest, an enormous corporation, and a facile eye for pretty girls.

It was only yesterday that he had seen Me Boon Rawt tripping along the road past his house, and his evil, alcohol-inflamed eyes had watched the neat figure until it had disappeared out of sight in the sun-drenched glare. True, he already had four wives, all of whom were passing fair, but he was beginning to tire of them and a little fresh blood was always comforting. Therefore he had grinned to himself and, his face coarsening with desire, had beckoned to his assistant, who was the "Who's Who" of all the village. In fact, the man had to be to keep his job.

There followed a visit to the parents and an offer of what was, to them, an almost fabulous price. A whispered consultation between father and mother had taken place. They were a good old couple, these two, and never in all their lives had they wilfully done harm to a living creature; they loved their daughter, they liked Nai In Toh, but, unfortunately, he had not been blessed with much of this world's goods, while apparently the money-lender had. Still, she was yet of tender age, would the Great One consent to wait for say six months, by the end of which time his blossom would be ripe for the plucking?

The Great One would, but he desired her in the meanwhile to come every day to his house and help prepare and serve his meals, so that by the time she became his fifth wife she would know thoroughly his likes and dislikes and be the perfect chattel.

Out had come an enormous scroll of parchment from Mong Ong Dah's pocket, for this gentleman was nothing if not businesslike. The contract was duly drawn up, stamped and witnessed, signed by the purchaser, and thumb-printed by the awe-struck sellers, half the money being handed over to the parents on the spot, the remainder to be paid for on complete delivery of the goods, so to speak.

It was all so simple and straightforward.

NAI IN TOH rose listlessly to his feet and, forgetting even to bathe and don his shirt, walked out through the gates of the compound, down through the market-place, and along the road till it gradually narrowed into a tiny path winding in and out between the towering green walls of the jungle.

After some ten minutes' progress the flutter of a white skirt caught his eye; he gave a start of surprise and then recollection came to him. It must be the Mem-Sahib Everett going out to meet her husband, who had been away all day in an outlying village attending patients, and who would shortly be riding back home in the cool of the evening.

The coolie watched her as, unconscious of his presence, she walked along ahead. To him she seemed such a little, fairy-like thing, hardly made of good flesh and bone. She was not half so beautiful as Boon Rawt, he reflected, for were not her eyes blue instead of brown, and her nose straight and narrow instead of being nicely squat and flat? He remembered how, when his master had told him six months ago that a Mem was coming out to live on the compound, he had been very much annoyed, for would she not try to boss him about, interfere with the work on the flower beds, and get in the way generally?

Instead, she had done nothing of the sort. She had pottered about a bit, it was true, and the flowers were certainly making a braver show now than they had ever done before, but that of course was all his doing, for she was so helpless, and so in many ways was the sahib, for that matter.

Could either of them, for instance, set a trap for a civet cat, or plunge into the Me Nam in flood, swim out among the booming teak logs swirling down, and tow one safely into the bank again, as he had often done? Of course they couldn't. And yet he feared them both, why he didn't quite know. But mingled with the fear was something else. What was it? A thoughtful frown puckered his brow for a moment and then cleared. Ah, he knew what it was: it was love. But how could you both fear and love a person? It was absurd. Still, they were curious people, these whites that came from the outside country, they were not as other tribes. He gave up the problem and his thoughts returned to Me Boon Rawt, causing the brow to cloud again and the heart to sink within him.

Then suddenly the Mem's voice aroused him. She had turned round, noticed him, and was now bending over something in the scrub just alongside the path.

"Nai In Toh," she called in her broken Lao, "Come and look at these funny eggs here and tell me what they are."

He hastened forward and then stopped dead, for his ear had caught a rustle in the jungle behind his mistress. His quick eye took in the nest, the position of the girl, the thick branch of a teak-tree close above her bended head, and then like a tiger he sprang. The girl was conscious of being caught up in two strong arms and literally hurled on to the branch above her, while below there whizzed across the swaying ground a long, black wicked form that missed them by the fraction of a second.

"Cling on where you are, mistress, for the love of the Great Buddha do not drop off, I shall not be long," whispered the coolie. Slowly he straightened himself up and walked like a monkey along the branch till he was directly over the curled up form of the hamadryad as she now lay on the nest guarding her eggs. He put his hand behind him and drew out the jungle-knife he always carried at the back of his belt.

The girl, watching fascinated, saw the gleaming brown body tauten like a coil spring, and the right arm slowly raised, the motion sending the perfect muscles rippling under the satin skin like shadows over wheat. For an infinitesimal fraction of a second the movement ceased, and he stood poised there, every muscle standing out of him in knots of iron. Then down flashed the arm and the knife, striking the snake square between the eyes, pierced through the head and fetched up inches deep in the ground beneath. A few convulsive struggles as it lay there pinned to the earth, and all was over.

"Drop off quick, mistress. The king-cobra may come at any moment; there is no time to lose."

Half-fainting, she loosened her hold. Again the lithe arms seized her. As in a dream the wall of jungle flashed past her, until finally she was set down on the path safely out of reach of danger. Then came the thunder of ponies' hooves and she was sobbing her heart out in her husband's arms.

That evening Nai In Toh stood before Dr. Everett in the study, uneasily shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"You have done well, In Toh," said his master. "Whatever you most wish for is yours."

"Whatever he most wished for." No, even the Great Master could not grant him that, for was not the contract stamped, signed and witnessed? Nothing, not even much money, could bring her back again. Under normal circumstances he would have asked for a little house with a real tin roof on, but what was the use of that now?

For a full ten minutes he stood motionless, his brain revolving to seek a way out. And then he spoke.

"Master, I wish for nothing now, but may I ask you again within six months?"

"You may," replied Everett.

The coolie salaamed and noiselessly disappeared into the cool darkness of the night, hastening lest he be late for the secret appointment with Boon Rawt. On his way through the market, however, he stopped at a small shop and bought a pair of scissors and a comb.

THE weeks passed; every night Boon Rawt would visit her lover at the rendezvous in the jungle, while during the day she attended to the needs of Mong Ong Dah. His four wives were jealous of her, and with spiteful zeal left every duty in the house for her little hands to perform. It was she who scrubbed the floor, washed the cooking pots, prepared the meals and served them to her future master.

Now the money-lender loved above all things fish curry, with lots and lots of rice in which were mingled a liberal supply of the finest shreds of the flesh of the cocoanut, and the way Boon Rawt made this savory dish pleased him greatly. He liked to have her by him as he ate, and he ate filthily, greedily, gouging the rice out of the dish, not with chop-sticks, but with his own flabby paws, by which he stuffed handful after handful into his large, octopus-like mouth.

The meal over, he would smack his lips loudly, gulp down a huge tot of poisonous brandy, pinch her ear playfully with his greasy fingers, and leer foully into her face. God, how she hated him.

After about two months, however, he began to eat more circumspectly because, for the first time in his life, indigestion was starting to trouble him. As the days progressed so did the pain in his belly become worse and, as it was a very big belly, so was the pain a very big pain. After a meal he would sit, holding his stomach in his arms, rolling from side to side on his hams on the floor with the perspiration streaming down his coarse, wicked features, ever and anon calling for brandy and yet more brandy.

"Ouw," said his assistant one day, "Why do you not go to the Dr. Everett; he is of great wisdom and will assuredly cure you?"

Now Mong Ong Dah liked not the white man, for the doctor knew the money-lender for what he was; also Mong Ong Dah knew the doctor for what he was; wherefore he feared him greatly.

"No," he replied, "this is not a case for a doctor. A very bad devil has got me, therefore go you and get a medicine man."

Then came the magician, and there was much sprinkling of holy water, and burning of candles, and chanting of songs that lasted all through the night and far into the morning, but still the devil would not depart: on the contrary, the pain grew rapidly worse.

At last his four wives came and whispered to him, glancing evilly to where Boon Rawt toiled among the pots.

Followed a thorough and efficient inspection of both the person and home of Boon Rawt, but with fruitless results; no bottles of poison, no deadly weeds, no instruments for crushing glass, nothing in any way suspicious was found.

To make assurance doubly sure, however, the money-lender detailed one of his wives to do the cooking, but he still allowed the girl to be by him while he ate, for he liked to feast his eyes on her; it helped to take the pain away. Even then he decreed that she should be thoroughly searched every day on her entering the house in the morning, but after a week's negative results he discontinued the practice.

At last, one mellow evening, when only two weeks more remained for the fulfilment of his desire, his whole enormous belly writhed in such agony that he rolled speechless on the floor, biting, clawing and snapping at everything within his reach, the while his wives watched him in helpless impotence.

The fit passed off temporarily:

"Take me to the Dr. Everett," he gasped. Somehow his staff bundled the huge body into a passing bullock-cart, and the bullocks were whipped out of their sluggish walk into a shambling trot toward the hospital.

But by the time they had reached their goal the spirit of Mong Ong Dah, money-lender and body-snatcher, had gone to seek its ancestors. To seek, perchance, but not to find.

FOR a while the doctor bent over the dead body; then he straightened himself up and asked certain questions of the man's relatives gathered round, the results of which left him frankly puzzled. And then he ordered the body to be removed to the operating room.

He locked himself in alone with the corpse, got ready his X-ray apparatus and operating knives, and for an hour he worked in his shirt-sleeves. By seven o'clock he had finished and, placing something in a small glass bottle which he put in his pocket, he opened the door, dismissed the relatives, crossed over to his study and locked the bottle up in a small safe that stood at one end of the room.

This done, he bathed, had a stiff whisky-and-soda, and joined his wife for dinner.

The meal over, Everett returned to his study, took the bottle out of the safe again, and sat down in a long rattan chair, in which he remained lost in thought until a knock at the door aroused him. He called a reply, the door opened softly, and to his surprise Nai In Toh came into the room, leading Me Boon Rawt by the hand. The coolie's quick glance took in his master's set face and the bottle standing on a small table beside him, and he looked the doctor fully in the eyes:

"Master," he began, "we love each other, Boon Rawt and I, and now Mong Ong Dah is dead there is only one thing more between us. I was to have asked you for a little house with a real tin roof on, but you are all-wise and all-powerful, and now I wish for that," the speaker paused and pointed to the bottle.

"But it is against the law," answered Everett.

"Master, I know. I am in your hands."

"Tell me one thing," said the doctor. "How was it done while one of the wives did the cooking?"

"I cut the—the things up shorter, and Boon Rawt she hid them in her finger nails, for she was allowed to be by him as she ate. But it took much longer that way.

"It would," said Everett grimly.

"Master, you have given me a promise that whatever I most wished for is mine. Is the white man's word lightly broken?"

In the distance Everett could hear his wife's voice singing happily, for she had told him great news that day. His eyes travelled to the sweet brown maiden; he took in the tiny hands, the delicate feet, the trusting brown eyes. Beside her stood the goodly youth, a very monument of the proud and beautiful handiwork of God. He thought of the brown piccaninnies to come, rolling their fat, naked bodies gleefully in the dust. Was he to be their murderer?

He thought of his own white babies to be, that but for the youth before him would ever have been a hopeless dream. Then, lastly, he thought of the hideous, bloated corpse in the room behind.

"It is not lightly broken," he replied, and the brown hand stretched out and took the bottle from the white one.

In it was a rolled up ball of coagulated cat's hairs, that had once been as white as snow, or as white, shall we say, as cocoanut shredding.

The Magical Mystical East

As readers of EVERYBODY'S *know L. G. Blochman can write with very accurate knowledge of the East. Next month we'll publish the first of a series of stories by him revolving around the character of an American sergeant who becomes a general in a Chinese army; its title "The Capture of Ping Chow."*

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

IT'S Monday morning and even so, even though it is Monday morning, I'm glad to be back at my desk. Yet on Friday noon when I left for the country I was just as delighted to get away. "Now," said I to myself, "for a fairly long and certainly a well-earned rest!"

But it rained all Friday! And it rained all day Saturday. And it rained all day Sunday. And when I left this morning it was still raining. No wonder I'm glad to be back!

The worst of it was I was at the seashore and if there's anything more depressing than the seashore when it's raining, and raining relentlessly, I'd like to know what or where it is. And another difficulty was that I had failed to provide myself with anything like an adequate supply of reading matter. For, too, I had said to myself, "I won't read anything. I'll swim and play tennis and lie on the beach and loaf." At the last minute, however, I did stick in my bag four tales of Siam that Reginald Campbell sent me. They're exceptionally exciting stories in which elephants battle and natives plan thefts. You'll see these stories in Everybody's before very long. Meanwhile you can gauge their flavor by reading Mr. Campbell's story, *The Siamese Cat*, in this issue. But they only occupied an hour or two of what was otherwise an exceedingly dreary stretch of time.

But now I'm back on the job and I'm glad of it. So let's forget it!

SOME REASONS FOR FURTHER CHEERFULNESS

TO ADD to my satisfaction, I find on my desk some exceedingly nice letters about the new Everybody's. Of course, I won't be able to use that "new" much longer. It was almost a year ago that I, greatly to my surprise, was made editor of Everybody's and was commanded to make something out of it. Before that, the magazine had been, it must be confessed, steadily losing ground, steadily and rather rapidly losing its readers. But now it's taking hold again. I really think it is! Consider this letter, for instance, from Mrs. M. De V—— of Des Moines, Iowa:

> Can't begin to tell you how much I enjoy your new magazine. What an improvement!
>
> Just took Everybody's because it came with a club subscription—at first!
>
> One day, when I had exhausted all other reading matter, I picked up an Everybody's and to my surprise it was full of the best short stories I had ever read.
>
> I didn't stop until I had read every one. Then I immediately went to the basement to look up the back numbers. Talk about good reading!
>
> Now I wouldn't exchange one Everybody's for all three of the other magazines.
>
> Not only that, the relatives nearly drive me to drink trying to get in the first word for each copy before they even get here.
>
> Please excuse this long letter. It's merely a reader's excited ramble after reading *Tin in the Jungle*. I saved it to next to the last for dessert. Then I ate the whipped cream—Everybody's *Meeting Place*. It topped off the magazine in the most satisfying way. Oh, Gee! You're there!

Instead of hiding my blushes after that I'm going to publish another complimentary letter about EVERYBODY'S. Here it is:

A LETTER FROM INDIANAPOLIS

I have been thinking now for some time of sending a letter to EVERYBODY'S *Meeting Place.* I take the magazine regularly, but between holding down a job, trying to do a little writing of my own, and various other things, I don't always have time to read all the stories. But I always find time to read the get-together page. Personally, I think it is one of the very best features of your magazine. It brings us all closer together and makes us feel that authors and editors are not merely cold-hearted pieces of intellectuality, but are real honest-to-goodness warm blooded humans, just like ourselves.

I notice that you have quite a few comments concerning Western stories. Some people think you publish too many of them. It must be remembered, though, that some people regard all Westerns as cheap fiction. Personally, I do not. A story may be written for one of two reasons, or maybe both. It may have a moral, and be intended to point out some great truth. Or it may be written simply for pleasant reading and good entertainment. I think about 95% of the stories written are in this latter class. And about 99% of the reading public like this kind of story best. Therefore, since Westerns undoubtedly furnish those things, I think it wise to keep on publishing them.

I will give you a list of the writers and stories I like best. To me *The Smiling Death* was one of the best written and most delightfully entertaining stories I have read in a long time. It had a certain charm and flavor that made it very easy to read. I also liked *Snake Bite* very much. It was published some time ago. Of all the Western writers I believe I like William Corcoran the best. He seems to have caught the spirit of the West and conveys it to us in a very interesting fashion. He had a good one in the September issue. I also liked T. T. Flynn's *Tin in The Jungle* very much. I believe it was the best in the September issue. I also like Ared White, Walter Liggett, Captain Dingle; in fact I like them all.

NOW FOR SOME CRITICISM

BUT rather than have you think I'm becoming egotistic with all this flattery, I'll now publish some adverse criticism although it, too, is mingled with a great deal of favorable comment. This is from a man I know personally, and like tremendously, and who is one of the best and most consistent contributors to the new EVERYBODY'S. I am withholding his name, however, as I know he would not care to have me use it:

Got hold of the September EVERYBODY'S and intended going through it Saturday evening before going to a vaudeville show. At the time to start for the show I was reading Corcoran's *Prairie Feud* and was interested enough to forget the show and see his story through. I also read Flynn's story, and Captain Dingle's with genuine interest. The other stories I skimmed—reading them in part.

As a matter of fact I sat up until after midnight with EVERYBODY'S—which I hadn't intended doing. My reader interest is not easily satisfied—therefore I think the effect on me is something of a test of the value of the September number. I really believe you will build up a reader following that will stick and look forward to the magazine.

Naturally, I had to find something to criticise. That's human nature. And I hit right into the *Meeting Place.* Readable, breezy and live but—there's an old axiom among folks who deal a lot with the public. It is that you must take yourself seriously as hell in printed or spoken word. You can be as unconventional as you want and it wakes them up. But never give any inkling that you're conscious of it—never by any word or gesture apologize, explain or show a weakness. Many a fine speech has been damaged by the habit of the speaker in explaining that he wasn't much of an orator. No matter how strong his speech thereafter—there's always a subconscious memory of his own disparaging remarks. None of us ever take ourselves very seriously right down deep within ourselves. Heaven forbid! But the public mustn't get any inkling of it. And this isn't a theory—it's an axiom.

However that's straining at a gnat when you take the September EVERYBODY'S and lay it down beside the September 1926 issue. You've made something out of nothing in that period.

Congratulations! That's what I started out to say in the first place.

PERHAPS the gentleman is right and I am apt at times to become a little flippant in writing the *Meeting Place.* But my enthusiasm for the magazine, and for the stories in the magazine, isn't flippant. It is genuine and sincere. I think EVERYBODY'S is now publishing some tremendously good stories. I do try to write the *Meeting Place,* however, in an informal manner. As I've said before, I try to write about the magazine and its stories just as I would talk about them to you if we were sitting opposite each other at dinner or luncheon.

But isn't it about time we got to the contents of this particular issue?

THE PENDEXTER NOVEL

IN *The Roaring Towns,* it seems to me, HUGH PENDEXTER has recaptured to a very great extent the color and flavor of the old days of the West, when Cheyenne was an outpost of civilization and the coming of the railroads brought all sorts of disturbances to white men and red. The tale is not only exciting but authentic. Mr. Pendexter is a thorough student of the stirring times about which he writes. Concerning his preparations for *The Roaring Towns,* he says:

> Among the authorities I made use of in building *The Roaring Towns* are the following: Bancroft's *History of Wyoming* and vol. I of *Popular Tribunals;* Harry Young's *Hard Knocks;* Col. Henry B. Carrington's *Ab-sa-ra-ka;* Thomas Ingham's *Digging Gold in the Rockies;* Grinnel's *The Fighting Cheyennes;* Custer's *My Life on the Plains;* J. H. Beadle's *Western Wilds;* Jas. H. Cook's *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier;* Col. Homer W. Wheeler's *The Frontier Trail;* Capt. John G. Bourke's *On the Border with Crook;* Stansbury's *Report on the Great Salt Lake;* Sawyer's *Our Rifles;* Wyoming Historical Society's *Quarterly Bulletin,* vol I, numbers 1 and 2; Same, Vol. II, number 3; same, Vol. II, numbers 4; Collections Wyoming State Historical Department; John White's *Sketches from America,* mss. loaned to me by State Historical Department, Wyoming, narratives by Al. White, Mrs. Annie K. Parshall, W. P. Carroll; *Nebraska Historical and Record of Pioneer Days,* vol. VII, No. 1, J. H. Triggs *History of Cheyenne and North Wyoming; Annals of Wyoming,* vols. I and II, by State Historical Department of Wyoming; Williams' *Pacific Tourist;* Zincke's *Last Winter in the United States; A Tribute to the Burro,* a speech by William C. Russell at the Miners' Annual Sowbelly Dinner, Denver, Jan. 20, 1925; *Dunbar's History of Travel.*
>
> Tex Eastwood, friend of Bridger, Carson, and other famous mountain men is said to have taken 600 beaver from the tributaries of the Green in one season. Triggs spells the bank manager's name, "Mirrison." I'm wondering if it wasn't "Morrison." Clouded land titles and squatter troubles are treated at some length by Bancroft in his *History of Wyoming.* An excellent description of hunting for the Cheyenne market is to be found in Cook's reminiscences, listed above.
>
> Bancroft gives the names of the Laramie City desperadoes as "Asa Moore, Con Weiger, Edward Barnard, Steve Young, alias Long Steve." Harry Young gives them as "Ace and Con Moyer, Big Ned and Big Steve." Young describes how men were murdered in the back room of the "Bucket of Blood" saloon and hauled out to a dry gulch. Young, page 123, says he got his information first hand from N. K. Boswell, who was on the scene at the time of the murders and the execution of the Moyers and Big Steve. His book has an old daguerreotype, showing the "Moyers" and Big Steve hanging from the timbers of a partly constructed log-house. Steve's boots are on the ground. He says they were hung at Laramie October 28, 1868. Bancroft, page 717, Pop. Tribunals, vol. I, gives none of these details, but says that all four were hung, "Long" Steve refusing to leave town after his partners were executed. Bancroft states they were hung "a day in October." If Big Ed was hung at that time he was not with the three men Young mentions, else the picture would show four instead of three men.
>
> In covering nearly two-score frontiers, early Cheyenne has been the most difficult to handle in that it seemed impossible to accumulate the requisite amount of data. The Wyoming Historical Society was most kind and loaned me mss., but the society is young and the World War must have interrupted its fine work. Only one volume of Coutant's history has been printed. A day spent in the Boston Public Library afforded me but one item that threw any light on early Cheyenne and that was Trigg's thin volume. Of course, as always, I shall gladly welcome any corrections of errors. And I am still preaching the importance of preserving in print old letters, journals, and such like contemporary reflections of frontier beginnings on every frontier. It commonly happens that after a story appears in print, dealing with facts as well as fiction, the writer receives the offer of a loan of the most interesting diaries. I had the privilege of examining several such after the yarns had appeared in print, and while in each instance they have come too late to be of service to me I have urged upon the owner to send them to his state historical society so that the next "feller" can profit by them. Nor does it always follow that an eye-witness of some dramatic, or tragic, happening will always agree with another eye-witness, and in that case the writer must try to approximate what he believes to be the truth. But pioneer journals are the best records we can have of what happened in a particular locality. One historical society in its annual publication spoke nicely of my yarn concerning that particular locale, but dropped a fly in the ointment by stating I had made several "palpable errors." Doubtless I did, but it hurt a bit inasmuch as that particular frontier was rich in material gathered, endorsed and printed by the historical society, and all my facts were drawn from its publications.

OTHER FEATURES

THIS particular issue of EVERYBODY'S is unique in this way: there's not a single author in this number who has not appeared in the new EVERYBODY'S before. PENDEXTER and SPEARS, of course, have both appeared previously. And SANDERS, BURTIS, CAPTAIN DINGLE and the rest of them have all contributed. But don't think we're not constantly on the search for new writers. We are!

Pay particular attention to *The Siamese Cat* by REGINALD CAMPBELL. As I've said it was Campbell who sent me the four stories of Siam that were the one—or should I say four?—bright spots of color over that relentlessly rainy week-end.

In conclusion, how are you getting on with your solution of *The Desert Moon Mystery?* Are you going to get one of the modest prizes for your solution? And if you don't know what I mean by this cryptic utterance, read last month's *Meeting Place.* And so, sincerely, if flippantly,

O. G.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

Three Novelettes

Leaning Joe's Deputies by William Corcoran

Corcoran has created a real character for this Western novelette. You'll like Leaning Joe—his laziness, his humor, and his sudden violent call to action when action is acutely needed.

Out of the Night by T. T. Flynn

Flynn wrote "Tin in the Jungle" which made such a hit in our September issue. Here's another tense tale of the East.

The Golden Burros by Frederick Niven

Niven is new to Everybody's but we'll wager you'll like this story of a perilous hunt for ancient treasure in the deserts of the West.

Another Great Story of the Great War

By ARED WHITE

A most ingenious spy story in which you both hate and despise the hero and are constantly and anxiously puzzled to the very last.

And a Chinese story, "The Capture of Ping-Chow" (the first of a series) by L. G. Blochman; a flying story, "Three Miles Up," by Raoul Whitfield; a rollicking humorous yarn by Thomas Thursday; the serials by Hugh Pendexter and Kay Cleaver Strahan and other decidedly worthwhile fiction.